

WOMEN IN VIDEOGAMES. FROM BARBIE TO XENA

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Abstract

Videogames in Central and Eastern European countries became a big hit after the fall of communism, and the flourishing of software piracy in the region played an important role in this phenomenon. However, there is still a need for studies in this field. Further analysis of videogame players from CEE countries should try to identify cultural characteristics in this kind of manifestations of citizens in the post-industrial era. In this paper I try to offer a general perspective of the representation of women in videogames. I deal mostly with famous characters from best-selling games like “Tomb Raider,” but I also talk about characters from other games played by a handful of players.

Introduction

I used to be a woman and to live in the city of Lille, in France. I used to date a guy who was from Montpellier. We got to know each other by online chatting and one day I asked him to come to visit me. And then I left virtual reality and I became a man again.¹

This is only one of the many transgendered experiences one can have with the use of virtual reality. The effect of television programs and advertisements upon the gender roles expectations of both women and men has received considerable attention. However, as the popularity and accessibility of video games continued to increase, the question of the effect of the portrayal of women in video games upon gender roles expectations as well as upon the uses of violence arose.

In this paper I try to offer a general perspective on women’s representations in videogames. Although I dwell mostly on famous characters from best-selling games like “Tomb Raider,” I also talk about characters from other games that played by a handful of players. Videogames in Central and Eastern European countries became a big success after the fall of communism, and the flourishing of software piracy in the region played an important role in this phenomenon. However, there is still a need for studies in this field. Further analysis of videogame players from CEE countries should try to identify cultural characteristics in this kind of manifestation of citizens of the post-industrial era citizens.

An attempt to categorize women characters in videogames

In order to evaluate the roles of women in the game, the following categories could be useful:

- 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 other aspects, including women leaving with the male winner);

¹ It was during my BA studies, that I discovered the chat service and all the games that can be played while chatting. I was a frequent gamer at that time too, I was usually playing adventure games like “Monkey Island” and “Tomb Raider.”

- female characters as victims (based upon the women who had been kidnapped or assaulted as part of the plot);
- female characters as the heroines (based upon whether or not there were female characters who were or could be the action character and winner of the game);
- female characters in feminine roles (based upon appearance, such as wearing pink, long dresses and the like, and other features, such as playing supportive roles to men).

In a classification which uses stereotyped names to designate different personalities of women characters in videogames, one can find: Barbie (such as the girls who are just getting a sun tan near the gulf course in one game), standing for the image of women as mere decorations; Lucy (the good-wife character, like most of the female characters in “The Sims”), representing women in most of the “god-simulation” and traditional simulation games; Xena (such as the women from the game “Mortal Kombat”),² the famous warrior princess from the homonymic TV series. Sometimes, the three categories mix, as in the case of the famous Eidos Interactive production, “Tomb Raider,” in which Lara Croft is the prototype of the rich, beautiful and brave woman.

Of course, these classifications are just attempts to differentiate between many female characters in videogames, but they are based upon stereotypes, which can also be found in other mass-cultural productions (books, TV shows, motion pictures).

Barbie-like characters

We all remember the game “Donkey Kong” which featured the player as the male plumber Mario attempting to rescue princess Zelda from the giant male ape. The main point of the game was to dodge obstacles throughout the many levels and it was presumed that the theme of the male hero rescuing a woman in peril was sufficient to make the game appealing. This was found to be true. But videogames evolved a lot since that time.³

Most of the women from the “Barbie” category are mere decorations and/ or bystanders in the game. Big breasts, small waist, sensual lips and perfect hair – this is the prototype of the Barbie-like characters. Some of them are not characters in the game, but the reward for winning a certain stage or the whole game, like the much-downloaded “Tina’s Strip Poker,” where a woman undresses herself if the player wins a hand. This game was a big hit in “Romanian Top 100,”⁴ an online service that indexes and monitors the most visited Romanian websites. The websites that offer “Tina’s Strip Poker” for download are always in the Top 10 list. “Tina’s Strip Poker” is only an example from the category of “desktop games” – simple games (in terms of kilobytes and interface) that can be played in the office, during work or between tasks. It is also the source of many “desktop companions,” animated characters, often women, that stand on the desktop and are willing to do whatever the user asks them to (including striptease shows).

² This game turned into a TV series. The most famous case of a videogame turned into a movie is, without any doubt, that of “Tomb Raider,” where Angelina Jolie plays Lara Croft.

³ A comprehensive list of game consoles in the last 20 years and a timeline of videogames can be found in the appendix of the book edited by Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, *The Video Game Theory Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 303-314.

⁴ “Romanian Top 100.” Online. Available HTTP: <www.top100.ro> (last accessed May 6, 2004).

“Baldur’s Gate: Dark Alliance” gives the example of a hyper-sexualized non-player character who appears in the beginning of the game. The beginning is generally the critical moment for setting the mood, tone, and boundaries of the game space.

In “Need for Speed” the objective is to win a car race. But the races are illegal and fair-play rules do not apply here. In “Need for Speed Underground,” a new version of the widely pirated game, the player is introduced to the thrilling illegal car races by a sexy young woman. She is just introducing the user to the other players and she is presenting them the rules of the game and then disappears to let the “big boys” play. She is dressed in stretched blue jeans, a blouse that allows the player to take a peek at her breasts and she has a bandana over her hair. Surprisingly, she can be seen only at the beginning of the game, right after its installation and only if the player chooses to go underground. Although the woman character knows all the rules of the competition and the names and personalities of the other contestants, she is not participating in the race. There are no feminine contestants in “Need for Speed.”

A special case is the “Final Fantasy” series, which introduces characters inspired from the anime cartoons, the Japanese animation movies where characters have big blue eyes, red lively lips and exaggeratedly expressed emotions. The main character is Tidus, a young player of “blitzball,” who is once attacked by a malefic force: The Sin. In a universe dominated by mysticism and magic, Tidus is accompanied by several women: Rikku, a young girl member of the Al Bedh people, Lulu, a magician, Yuna, a worshiper.

One of the main changes in the X-2 version of “Final Fantasy” is the possibility of changing outfits even during battles. Drawing from all kinds of real-world inspirations – from high-fashion glossies like Vogue to the fantastical costume design in movies like “The Fifth Element,” the chief designer from the company Squaresoft, that coded the game, created a collection of clothing that would reflect the unique personality of each underlying job of the characters. In several interviews, the designer encouraged players to experiment “dresspheres,” suggesting that this was one of the best assets of the game and that aside from the story, that is what the enjoyment should be focused on.⁵ All three girls in the game can change on the fly during battle, and the player feels like changing the clothes at every other turn, in order to help with different monsters and different strategies. Clothes can give the player different powers in this game, but they also mix him/ her with the other players. In the eyes of a player at the beginner’s level, even Tidus is a girl; his face and outfit are very important in reaching this conclusion.

Sometimes the appealing physical appearance of famous women in real life induces game designers to build products that are not very playful or inventive, but serve only one interest – spending time in the virtual world with a virtual avatar of the real star-system women. This is the case of a game called “Britney Dance Beat” which features the singer Britney Spears in the role of a choreographer. Featuring five well-known songs, the game claims to be capable of teaching teenagers how to dance on modern beats. But the most intriguing parts of the game are the same sexually provocative angles of female characters on the screen. The virtual Britney contributes to the success of the dance lessons through her erotic exclamations which include phrases such as: “Almost there,” “Don’t stop,” “That was hot,” “Now you’re getting it.” The confused male player does not know whether he has purchased a harmless dance lessons game or a sexual cybertoy. In one review, the author, who happens to

⁵ Steinman, Gary, “Final Fantasy X-2; Girls just wanna have fun,” *Official U.S. Playstation Magazine* 75 (2003): 126-140.

be a woman, is stressing that, in fact, these exclamations distract the player from the real aim of the game.⁶

Magic solves all problems

In most videogames, women are associated with magical characters. Role-Playing Games (RPGs) and quest games are mostly suited to introduce characters with magical powers, because traditionally in this kind of games the main character has to use several tools and weapons, but also magical potions, wands and witchcraft. Usually, magical powers are used when everything else fails, but there are games – like “Final Fantasy” – in which these abilities are the main tools and weapons.

In “Project Zero,” Miku is the sister of a journalist who mysteriously disappears in a haunted mansion, during his search for a writer who had disappeared. All she has to do is follow the complicated hallways in the house, always in the dark, in search of clues to solve the mystery. Her only weapon is a magical photo camera that she uses instinctively: whenever she feels a danger or a phantom coming close, she pushes the button. The camera triggers the flash that weakens the phantoms. Then the photo reveals hidden things in the chambers that help her find the way. Miku is dressed in a tight shirt and a blouse underneath and wears a miniskirt. Although she is sometimes afraid in the dark, she manages to go on. An important thing is the random viewpoints. Although the main viewpoint of the game is the first person view (the player sees the game as if she/ he were the main character), this changes sometimes and the player finds her/ himself away from Miku, but still able to guide her. This eliminates in a way the need of male players to change viewpoints just to see the female character from different positions.

Good wife-like characters

The earliest versions of the game were insisting upon the image of women as good wives, by setting specific behaviors in the free-will mode. Characters now engage in same-sex relationships, polygamy and affairs, and even criminal careers are fair game. The goal of the game is to make the Sims happy. First, the player fashions one or more Sim characters by choosing from a menu that includes gender, skin and body type, age and various personality traits – funny or serious, lazy or neat, passive or aggressive. Players can develop as many Sims as they want, exchanging individuals or whole families with other players over the Internet.

The creator of The Sims made sure that certain kinds of behavior remained taboo. While characters can get into fights and even cause others to die, the game stops short of depicting anything but an occasional slap. Mia Consalvo thinks that this is not a good incentive for the player, as he/she does not always know whether the game is an imitation of the real world or a parallel virtual world.⁷

The fact that the player can choose and configure her/ his own characters is refreshing in a videogame, but a closer examination of these choices suggests that

⁶ Clélia Cohen, “Jeux de société,” *Cahiers du cinéma* (special issue on videogames) (September 2002): 74-75.

⁷ Mia Consalvo, “Hot Dates and Fairy-Tales Romances: Studying Sexuality in Video Games” in Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, eds., *The Video Game Theory Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 171.

underneath this diversity there are classical sex and gender stereotypes. The first example that pops up when you want to configure a character is a white man with a white shirt and pocket protector and gray pants, suggesting that this is the social norm of the game and the other characters only deviate from it.

There are sixteen bodies for women, five for children and eighteen for men to choose from. No body is disabled or fat, the majority being slim.

The game has six expansion packs now (they can be seen as six different games or six levels of the same game). “The Sims” is a game that never ends, as long as the player keeps his/her characters happy. The game evolved a little since its first expansion pack and now the player can have more options, like having same-sex characters kiss and sleep in the same bed and this kind of couples can adopt a child through an adoption agency. Same-sex couples are not allowed to get married (“The Sims” is an American production after all).

Power and beauty – the winning combination: the case of Lara Croft

Lara Croft is not just somebody men players want to bed; she is someone they want to be. It is a question that is often reduced to trying to decide whether she is a positive role model for young girls or just that perfect combination between a perfect body and the physical strength for the boys.

Lara Croft is a clear example of an ethnical hybridizing, as she has physical characteristics that identify her as a member of several ethnic groups. Could this be an attempt of the game designers to be “ethnically correct” or just a commercial move meant to make all (men) players to ethnically empathize with Lara?

It is clear that the producers of Lara wanted to market her as a character potentially appealing to women; her arrival on the game scene dovetailed was compatible with the “girlpower” movement of the ‘90s. One can locate Lara among a number of “aggressive” and highly sexualized female characters that rose to prominence in the ‘90s – including Buffy the Vampire Slayer, from the homonymic TV series. These characters have a strong “bimodal” appeal in that they manage to engage large groups of both young men and women.

“Tomb Raider” is a “third person shooter” where the player actually sees the body of her/his own avatar. The “third person” angled view of Lara Croft from behind and below, and the shifting close-up and wide-angle camera angles favor a visual fragmentation of Lara’s Barbie-like proportions. Part of the game is finding new ways to see Lara’s perfectly shaped polygons from different angles. Movements like “ducking” are preferred by men players as they offer “forbidden” views like Lara’s buttocks. This manipulation of the original code of the game (which is not secret in fact, as many players try the method of switching camera angles very often), along with the physical and mental strength that Lara conveys, offers a nearly complete virtual erotic experience (with masochistic accents, because changing camera views sometimes implies making Lara doing painful things and also because the player, in most cases, thinks he/she IS Lara). The absence of any romantic or sexual intrigue within the game narrative potentially leaves her sexuality open to conjectural appropriation on the part of the players. As I noticed from informal discussions with players of “Tomb Raider,” women players often prefer saying that they “play Tomb Raider” and men use the words “play Lara Croft.” This can be an effect of the great promotion that the game and the character had in the media and in many forms

(articles, books, TV features, motion pictures) but also a sign of the different approaches to the game based on gender.

Maybe the success of the game is based not only on the appearance of Lara Croft, but also on the fact that it was the first game to use state-of-the-art special effects, a three-dimensional impression of the environment and an original narrative (even though it was highly inspired by the story of Indiana Jones). But we can all agree that the use of a sexy female character as the main engine of the game was a surprise. People started talking about the way women are portrayed through this game only after they woke up from this shock. What was also interesting was the fact that people who had never played “Tomb Raider” or any other game before still knew what Lara was standing for and got their perceptions regarding women in videogames by the intermediary of this specific game.

“Tomb Raider” is a game that can be analyzed from multiple points of views: a movie, a game, a narration or it can be integrated in the queer readings. The last approach is favored by the fact that Lara is performing in a male-dominated environment. The jungle, suggesting mystery, power and risk, is the symbol of the stereotypic image of the environment men evolve in. Mia Consalvo is asking some questions that need to be further explored in other game studies: Could Lara be a woman in a male drag? In fact, is Lara still a woman, since her feminine characteristics are so exaggerated that we can say that they do not belong to a woman?⁸ Rigid gender roles are broken down, allowing the young boys and men who constitute the majority of “Tomb Raider” players to experiment with “wearing” a feminine identity. It is in a way the same phenomenon that the Internet experienced in the ‘80s and in the ‘90s, when chat rooms and Multi-User Dimensions allowing gender crossing were flourishing. After all, cyberspace allows safe gender crossing experiments and games fulfill some repressed sexual desires.

Conclusion

I am not a big player of videogames but I can say that I know who are the virtual characters that people “play with.” I find much pleasure in finding hidden treasures in old text-based games and I admire a lot the work and efforts game designers put in a production like “The Sims.” But I am sometimes amazed by the lack of imagination on gender portrayals in some videogames. We are still a long way from the ideal cyberspace that does not take into account at all “real-world” factors like gender, race, wealth etc. The games represented in this paper are not meant to be representative for all videogames in which women play a main or secondary role. These are only case studies that show the multiple facets that women’ portrayals can have in such productions of our modern era. Gender in videogames is one of their main components and theories in this emerging field of study need critique. Paraphrasing a famous advertisement for a game console, I must say, concerning the field of videogames: “Theorists wanted.”

⁸ Ibid.

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