

Portrayal of women and its influence on mental health and gender perception in digital environments

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Abstract

Game developers potentially convey socio-cultural values about gender through design choices. We interpreted the designs of 11 purposively selected female game characters, developed by studios located in the United States and Japan, through the lens of ambivalent sexism. This social psychological theory posits that sexism consists of hostile and benevolent attitudes about women. Two themes emerged across characterizations, bodies as objects, bodies as weapons and (in)dependence. Both consisted of empowering qualities paired with problematic beliefs about women. This analysis contributes to interdisciplinary literature by using an empirical perspective to interpret gender representations in video games.

Keywords: video games, gender, ambivalent sexism, benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, qualitative analysis

Recent evidence indicates the digital games industry might be experiencing a positive cultural shift with portraying female characters (Lynch, Tompkins, van Driel, & Fritz, 2016). Yet, some sexist representations (Dietz, 1998; Summers & Miller, 2014), sexual objectification (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Dietz, 1998; Downs & Smith, 2010), and marginalization of female compared to male characters (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009; Perreault et al., 2016) persist. Character designs reflect collective choices of game developers shaped, in part, by their socio-cultural contexts. Such contexts give rise to gender norms and attitudes (Glick et al., 2000). Limited research contextualizes game design decisions within such socio-cultural contexts.

Games studies scholars have undertaken critical analysis of representation and gender as complex systems in need of examination and interrogation (Malkowski & Russworm, 2017). Using the ambivalent sexism framework (Glick & Fiske, 2001), we offer a novel critique through interpretation of 11 playable female characters in digital games created by studios in Japan and the United States (US). Rather than attempting to generalize to an increasingly diverse industry, we purposively selected characters exclusive to US and Japanese console/computer games because these countries and platforms have historically dominated the global marketplace (Consalvo, 2006). The selected characters embody aspects of ambivalent sexism, an empirically established basis within which we interpreted portrayals as primarily problematic, yet with potentially empowering dimensions. This work, consequently, uses a perspective of human psychology (i.e., a general theory of how people think and feel) as a framework guiding our interpretation of why designers might portray certain characters in sexist ways and how players might perceive those portrayals. It contributes to several bodies of literature – namely mediated communication, gender studies, and digital game studies.

Ambivalent Sexism and Media Tropes of Women

Media creation involves selection and exclusion of details when representing an individual or group; consequently, media depictions signify the social understandings and relationships among groups (Gorham, 1999). Scholars and critics have levied considerable

critique at the video game industry for its representation of female characters. We suggest that these representations likely stem from acculturated attitudes about women. These sexist attitudes structure the broader value systems that permeate the social, cultural, political, and economic environments in which game developers create and market their wares.

Established by Western scholars, the ambivalent sexism perspective theorizes that sexism entails two orthogonal and broadly occurring prejudicial attitudes towards the female gender (Glick & Fiske, 2001) that either presume men's rightful dominance (hostile sexism) or justify patriarchy (benevolent sexism). Paternalism (dominant/hostile; protective/benevolent), gender differentiation (competitive/hostile; complementary/benevolent), and heterosexuality (compulsory/hostile; intimate/benevolent) are the underlying dimensions of both types of sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). As both are equally prevalent in the US and Japan (Glick et al., 2000), we anticipate ambivalent sexism to shape depictions of women in game design to some extent and that those characterizations may look different given particulars of the respective cultures.

Hostile Sexism

Hostile sexism promotes de facto dominance of men over women and contempt towards women who seek equal status. Hostile sexism frames a woman's empowerment through feminism or sexuality as manipulative, dangerous, and antagonistic (Glick & Fiske, 2001). The alluring femme fatale in fictional Western media is one example of a popular female trope that signifies aspects of hostile sexism. These characters exert power and sexuality as commonly portrayed in American film noir (Grossman, 2009; Simkin, 2014). The femme fatale emerged in US cinema post-World War II when women experienced newfound power and status in the social order. The misgivings about sex roles, marriage, and sexuality that gave rise to the beautiful yet treacherous cinematic femme fatale reflected societal reticence at the notion of women usurping traditionally male-dominated American society (Boozer, 1999). The femme fatale conveyed characteristics reflective of hostile attitudes towards the role of women within Western cultures (Simkin, 2014).

Although designers draw inspiration from many sources, a creative and commercial link exists between the US film and digital game industries. Commercial game development studios in the US sometimes utilize popular licensed characters from films to subsidize production costs (Izushi & Aoyama, 2006). Indeed, a Call of Duty studio lead claimed that offering players "a movie-like experience" is part of the franchise's success (Kain, 2013). Thus, idea transmission and inspiration may flow from Hollywood films to digital game development. Although fully realized empowered femme fatales in digital games have been scarce (Malkowski, 2017), we speculate that some female characters share qualities with this trope.

Benevolent Sexism

Benevolent sexism traditionally ascribes agentic qualities such as protectiveness, responsibility, and leadership to men and frames women as the recipients and submissive benefactors of men's action (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Benevolent sexism also fosters the perpetual subordination of women by emphasizing their value as romantic partners of the male gender (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Although benevolent sexism promotes an overall positive and desirable view of women, this perspective remains problematic as it essentializes women as weak and reliant on men through an idealized, heteronormative lens.

A national survey of the prevalence of benevolent sexism in Japan, a country of patriarchal values (Reischauer, 1988; Davies & Ikeno, 2002), indicated that this type of sexism positively correlates with holding idealized, patriarchal stereotypes about women (Glick et al., 2000). These attitudes may manifest in entertainment media. In Japan, for example, the *kawaii*

aesthetic conveys sweetness, purity, and innocence; traits that are highly admired as a unique form of beauty in Japanese culture (Kinsella, 1995). Aspects of the kawaii aesthetic are frequently embodied in female characters in Japanese media, including comics and digital games. Entwined in the kawaii aesthetic is a popular media trope of broad importance in Japanese culture – the shojo, an adolescent girl who never grows up (Napier, 1998). The traditional shojo character embodies an ideal, non-threatening femininity (Gwynne, 2013). Given the centrality of purity, innocence, and gentleness in the kawaii and shojo tropes, these depictions arguably exemplify aspects of benevolent sexism.

Video games are key components of the Japanese media mix, or character-based franchises often featuring characters that make appearances in more than one medium (Ito, 2006). For example, a popular comic series may be adapted into a video game featuring many of the iconic characters from the source material. This media convergence arguably inspires the aesthetic of female character designs in Japanese video games, who may exemplify kawaii and shojo traits.

The femme fatale and kawaii/shojo tropes serve as examples of ambivalent sexism as it may appear in portrayals of female characters from two predominate countries in global digital game development (Consalvo, 2006; 2009). Our objective is not to reduce US and Japanese character design to two sexist tropes, nor is it to generalize an entire industry. Rather, we aim to establish how broader social psychological perspectives on gender may manifest within the design of some female game characters.

Women’s Portrayals in Video Games

Women in digital games are often sexualized (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Downs & Smith, 2010) and portrayed with idealistic bodies (Martins, Williams, Harrison, & Ratan, 2009). Although a bulk of research demonstrates the presence of sexist and somewhat narrow portrayals, studies have also documented powerful and complex female characters in digital games (Jansz & Martis, 2007). Yet, such powerful depictions may come at the expense of their femininity (see Herbst, 2004; Labre & Duke, 2004). When women in video games are modelled after strong and feminine personalities from existing intellectual properties (i.e. Buffy the Vampire Slayer), their portrayals may be reduced to a simpler and more masculinized portrayal (Labre & Duke, 2004). Drastic differences between the cooperative, feminine characterization of Buffy in the TV show and her stoic avatar in the Buffy the Vampire Slayer video game were observed: “she is unfeeling, uncaring, a cyborg with a blond ponytail” (Labre and Duke, 2004, p. 14). Thus, a patriarchal socio-cultural environment that privileges the potential desires of a heterosexual male audience may impact design. Traits that appeal to a male audience (e.g., attractiveness) may be maintained while those that do not (e.g., traditional femininity) are replaced. When industry stakeholders adapt content such as Buffy to suit a heterosexual male audience, the output may deter some women players from meaningfully engaging with the product.

Lara Croft, the heroine of the iconic Tomb Raider franchise and a pop culture icon since the late 90s, is central to debates concerning games and gender. The sexualized, powerful, and masculine depiction of the original Croft stimulated polarizing discussions about women’s representation in games. Kennedy (2002) asked readers to consider if Croft is a ‘feminist icon’ or ‘cyberbimbo,’ succinctly capturing the ambivalence surrounding Croft’s reception. Applying the ambivalent sexism framework (Glick & Fiske, 2001), we believe, acknowledges the contradictory social psychological attitudes about women (i.e., hostile and benevolent) that may influence female character design in digital games. As such, we asked:

Research Question 1: What is the nature of benevolent and hostile portrayals of female characters within Japanese and US video games?

Research Question 1a: Do Japanese and US designs differently represent the underlying dimensions of ambivalent portrayals (i.e., paternalism, gender differentiation, heterosexuality)?

Research Question 2: Do the portrayals disrupt prescriptive gender norms for women?

Method

We conducted a textual analysis of eleven playable female characters from US and Japanese console/computer games purposively selected as information-rich cases for in-depth interpretation applying the ambivalent sexism theory (rather than seeking empirical generalizations, see Patton, 2002). We chose characters whose portrayals seemed consistent with characteristics of ambivalent sexism, identifying characters with overtly sexual/dark allure, provocative appearances, and powerful portrayals (i.e., hostile sexism) or with traditionally feminine appearance/outfits, sweet/innocent personalities, and submissive/subdued portrayals (i.e., benevolent sexism). We selected prominent characters or characters from notable franchises, meaning that multiple stakeholders likely approved their production. Characters sampled for the study are from action-adventure (n = 5), roleplaying (RPG; n = 3), hack-and-slash (n = 2), and survival horror (n = 1) genres. Most titles include action elements.

Each author interpretively analyzed 3 to 4 characters. We refer to characters signifying hostile sexism as vamps and characters signifying benevolent sexism as virgins (Fox & Bailenson, 2009). To understand the characters and their broader context as argued by Carr (2017), we examined materials both from the original texts (i.e., the game content) and from those that exist as paratexts (e.g., development blogs).

Texts

We examined YouTube videos of gameplay lacking player commentary and all cutscenes from the respective title featuring the sampled character. Players' perceptions of protagonists may vary by the strategies employed by the player, items equipped in the character's inventory, achievements collected, and power-ups acquired may present a representational challenge for researchers (Carr, 2017). Simply put, variation in gameplay leads to different interpretations. Because we did not play the games under investigation, we acknowledge that our interpretations are mediated by the playstyles employed by those who uploaded the gameplay footage. However, we feel that sourcing YouTube videos provided consistency among all authors, since interactivity destabilizes the predictability of a game's representational aspects (Carr, Buckingham, Burn, & Schott, 2006). We deemed data collection sufficient when instances of the character's portrayal in the game became repetitive and subsequent observation added little to the analysis (Labre & Duke, 2004).

Paratexts

We noted information about the character and game(s), such as year of release, from video game websites such as IGN.com and GiantBomb.com. We sourced detailed information about the characters' backstories from game-specific Wiki websites (e.g. Tekkenpedia.com; Finalfantasy.wikia.com) and developer commentary that contributed insights on the character's design from official websites and blogs.

Interpretive Strategy

The first author created an analysis guide that included a series of open-ended questions organized by categories. These categories included ambivalent sexism (e.g. How does she signify qualities of/deviate from benevolent/hostile sexism?), physical appearance (e.g. What

does she wear? How does the camera present her body?), adherence to gender norms (e.g. What traditionally masculine/feminine qualities does she have?), actions and capabilities (e.g. How does she fight? How does she perceive her power?), and relation to others in the game (e.g. How do other characters treat her? Does she have close friendships/alliances?).

The authors met to discuss the findings and to clarify uncertainties after recording observations. The first author examined the responses on the textual analysis guide and cross-referenced the responses with the sourced YouTube videos. Finally, the first author compared the notes, discovered patterns among the observations and assigned conceptual labels to two salient themes: bodies as objects, bodies as weapons and (in)dependence.

Themes

The two themes correspond to ambivalent sexism and reinforce female subordination by 1) undermining the power of their characterizations through sexual objectification and 2) reinforcing the notion that character self-sufficiency was illusory, existing only due to their relationship with others. We also consider ways in which these themes possibly work to challenge sexist portrayals.

Bodies as Objects, Bodies as Weapons

This theme refers to the consistent pairing of highly powerful and capable characterization with sexualization; which, in media depictions, undermines the perception of humanizing agency because the woman's body is portrayed as representing her in totality (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). All vamp and most virgin characters wore sexualized and provocative (i.e., revealing, skin-tight) clothing, seemingly inviting a heterosexual male gaze while simultaneously signaling their indomitability. Thus, this theme reflects aspects of hostile sexism, such as the notion that women use their bodies to seduce and harm men.

Hostile sexism captures the tendency to quell assertive women and rein in expressions of sexuality that do not serve hegemonic (i.e., heterosexual) masculine interests. Thus, these heroines are objects in gameplay to be gazed upon as well as weapons used by the players to overcome obstacles. In this sense, the female character's body is an object for use in voyeuristic pleasure and satisfying game combat. In a more empowering interpretation, the theme refers to depictions of women's bodies as the ultimate weapons with an emphasis on physicality and violence as a means of overcoming obstacles.

(In)dependence

This theme refers to the relationships established between the heroine and her partner(s) in the gameworld. These games often portrayed the characters as independent agents even when others entered in supportive roles. For virginal characters who depended partially or completely on male counterparts the theme evokes aspects of benevolent sexism. While some depictions reinforced female-male sexual differences, others demonstrated more egalitarian or subversive themes.

We focus our analytical discussion on exemplar characterizations for which the documented themes were particularly salient. We discuss the themes in context of specific tropes to highlight problematic aspects of hostile and benevolent sexism in games, but also note potentially empowering departures.

Analysis of Characters

Vamps

Nina Williams. A staple of the fighting series Tekken (1994-2015, Namco, Japan), Nina is the protagonist of her own spin-off game, *Death by Degrees* (DBD; 2005, Namco, JP). In DBD, she does violence against countless male enemies while donning a series of tight and

revealing outfits, emphasizing her body as both object and weapon (footage captured by ViniGamesSeries, 2014). Nina embodies the physical appearance of a femme fatale but the narrative of DBD and her overall depiction provide sparse evidence that she employs sexuality as a means to an end. Nina's sexuality is never a subject of exploration despite the abundance of men in her world. Rather, Nina's femininity is most salient via her thin, scantily-clad body. And, although her behavior is highly masculine, her violent and powerful actions are undermined as players advance through the game – the more Nina fights, the more tears and shreds appear in her outfits, exposing titillating slits of flesh.

Nina dominates the men in her world, including those in need of her protection, to assert her independence. Nina assists a captive male scientist, Lukas, who is entirely dependent on her for his escape. When Lukas attempts to embrace her during a moment of despair, not out of sexual desire, she pushes him away with cold rejection. Nina's isolation from human support and genuine connection with others problematizes her (in)dependence because she is rendered an unfeeling cyborg more than a human with her own feelings or objectives.

Rayne. Rayne, the half-human, half-vampire lead of BloodRayne (2002, Terminal Reality/WayForward Technologies, US), is more than a mere sexual provocateur; she is also a dangerous and powerful fighter as signaled through the presence of long blades on her forearms (footage captured by Puppet23ca, 2012). Her fighting animations, in particular, portray her as a force of sexual and physical dominance. During a particularly titillating move, Rayne leaps onto her enemies and wraps her legs around their bodies, latching onto their torsos as she deeply drinks her foes' blood. Comments from the game's project manager indicate that Rayne's intensely sexual appearance and sadistically violent nature evoke 'lethal erotica' (Marriott, 2003). Rayne's weaponized aggression, violence, and objectification through seductive animations and voyeuristic camera angles pander to a perceived masculine audience.

Bayonetta. The eponymous witch of Bayonetta (2009, PlatinumGames, JP) fiercely battles foes with body movements reminiscent of a provocative striptease (footage captured by CutscenesGZUS, 2011). Her physique is often salient during cinematics that employ close-up shots of her buttocks, crotch, and breasts. Her appearance conveys a decisive femininity from the small details of her appearance (e.g. pink and purple butterflies adorning her glasses) to the notably voluptuous lines of her body. Her demeanor is much more characteristically masculine. In multiple encounters with sizable monsters and numerous encounters that find her outnumbered, she conveys unflinching nerve and demonstrates a high level of physicality (e.g. lifting buses and easily tossing them). Bayonetta derives her strength from an unusual source that underscores her body as both an object and a weapon – her long hair. She wears her hair as her clothing but when she enters battle, "she has no time to control the hair wrapped around her body and thus she ends up in more 'comfortable' attire (Shimazaki, 2009), a euphemism for varying levels of nudity during fight scenes.

Bayonetta maintains independence by relying on secondary characters only to perform menial tasks. She is particularly demeaning to the men who seem obliged to work for or with her. She is resolutely independent from Luka, a secondary male character with whom she spends a substantial portion of the game, often saving his life rather than relying on him for protection. Her main departure from playing the role of the lone hero, however, comes at the end of the game when she joins forces with Jeanne, her fellow Umbran Witch. Bayonetta and Jeanne's eventual alliance is an empowering theme underrepresented in mainstream content; that is, the notion of women saving women.

Hana Tsu-Vachel. Hana is the main protagonist of *Fear Effect 2: Retro Helix* (FE2; 2001, Kronos Digital Entertainment, US) and embodies the femme fatale par excellence as a Triad assassin who frequently uses her sexuality to outmaneuver enemies (footage captured by Gabriel Plays, 2015). The game's opening cutscene depicts Hana in lingerie sauntering towards a man. After a cut, Hana is shown calling her boss to confirm securing a valuable item as the camera reveals a man's corpse. The scene reveals Hana's seduction as the deadliest weapon in her arsenal.

Hana has a close connection with her female partner in FE2, Rain. The game never explicitly reveals the extent of the relationship. Her ambivalent relationship with Rain, at times, resembles a stereotypical heteronormative romance with Hana in the dominant, masculine role and Rain in the submissive, feminine role. Instances of cooperation and mutual concern expressed by the two women provide a balance of independence and dependency. Rain's eventual capture by her evil twin sister results in Hana's partnering with two male mercenaries, each her equal in strength and skill. This partnership suggests a feminist, cooperative team rather than a masculine, hierarchical one. Hana's blending of masculine traits and close relationship with Rain offer possible queer readings (e.g., Kennedy, 2002).

Vamp summary. Vamp characters tended to demonstrate qualities attributed to hostile sexism. These sexualized characters, were dangerous or ambivalent towards men, resonating with the hostile themes of compulsory heterosexuality and dominant paternalism. Nina's domination of men, Rayne's lethal erotica, Bayonetta's provocation, and Hana's violent sexuality fuel a sense of competitive gender differentiation in which the women both reject men in their stories, while simultaneously maintaining appearances that indulge a male gaze. Yet, we also found empowering readings in their portrayals. Their detached relationships from men and, in Hana's case the hint of a lesbian romance, work to evoke themes that these women reject dominant paternalism and compulsory heterosexuality.

Virgins

Juliet Starling. Juliet is the main character of *Lollipop Chainsaw* (2012, Grasshopper Manufacture, JP), a high school cheerleader and zombie slayer (footage captured by Gamer's Little Playground, 2014). A number of risqué and revealing downloadable costumes exist for Juliet but her main ensemble is her two-piece cheerleading uniform. In the game's introductory scene, she gushes about her boyfriend and is consumed with his reciprocal affection as she makes sexually suggestive remarks and rolls around in bed. Despite the confidence and command Juliet exudes, her depiction remains one that relies heavily on her as a sexual object. Her buttocks and breasts become the focus of nearly every cinematic sequence in which she interacts with her sensei. As Juliet introduces her boyfriend (depicted as a disembodied head hanging from her belt) to her sensei, she bends over and exposes her bloomers inches from the older man's face. He trips and his face falls into her cleavage in another scene. These actions work to subvert Juliet's dominance by constructing her status as object, mitigating her empowering potential.

Juliet is never alienated from support systems but also displays (in)dependence. Juliet makes her own decisions even as the dismembered head of her boyfriend discourages her from taking action. Another moment that defines Juliet's (in)dependence occurs with the introduction of her father. He is at once paternalistically protective and incredibly confident in Juliet's capabilities. Other aspects of the game's familial storyline provide a feminist story arc. Her older sister supports her both in the narrative and in gameplay as a sniper.

Serah Farron. Characters like Juliet are inherently powerful but others are empowered by magic. Serah, a protagonist of Final Fantasy XIII-2 (2011, Square Enix, JP), is a teacher who embarks on a journey to find her older sister, Lightning (footage captured by dansg08, 2013). Serah conforms to the sexualized shojo and magical girl characterizations; importantly, she receives powers to travel through time at the same moment she receives a sexualized outfit – a skintight, short dress with revealing cutouts.

Serah is traditionally feminine and occupies an important role within a supportive environment, yet depends on her male travelling companion, Noel. As the narrative advances, however, Sera frequently initiates a plan of attack and demonstrates strength, courage, and skill in combat. Characters like Juliet and Serah suggest that traditionally feminine characters are likely to depend on others.

Yorda. Yorda, the secondary character in ICO (2001, Team Ico, JP), is a quintessential virgin character in both appearance and portrayal (footage captured by NiZZULiVΞ, 2014). A slender girl whose fair complexion and white dress connote an ethereal purity, innocence, and vulnerability, Yorda's portrayal underscores a number of benevolent notions. During the initial play of the game, players cannot control Yorda. Her total reliance on Ico, the boy who saves her from a literal cage, seems primarily an outcome of the single-player nature of the game. Her dependence on him persists even when a second player controls Yorda's avatar. Ico's character has abilities far beyond Yorda's – he can fight, climb, and move objects. His abilities emphasize the hierarchical gender roles in their relationship. This characterization resonates with all three dimensions of benevolent sexism in that Ico protects and cares for Yorda, her role epitomizes complementary gender differentiation, and the narrative arc insinuates a heterosexual intimacy between the two characters.

Neptune. The main protagonist of Hyperdimension Neptunia Victory (2010, Idea Factory, JP), Neptune is the only character to demonstrate both exaggerated vamp and virgin qualities, is a magical girl with the alter-ego of the Goddess Purple Heart (footage captured by GalliaCrusader, 2014). During gameplay, she transforms from kawaii young girl into a powerful goddess, a common trope within shojo anime about magical girls (Gwynne, 2013). Her goddess persona wears a black leotard that emphasizes her breasts. Neptune's transformation into an exceptionally capable and powerful goddess aligns symbolically with scientific findings that female sexualization positively relates to capability in video games (Lynch et al., 2016).

Alyssa Hamilton. Similarly, Alyssa Hamilton of the horror video game Clocktower III (2002, Capcom Production Studio 3, JP) is a teenage schoolgirl searching for her mother (footage captured by SHN Survival Horror Network, 2015). Alyssa discovers she has supernatural powers inherited from her maternal family. At midnight on her fifteenth birthday in the midst of facing the game's main antagonist, her schoolgirl uniform magically transforms into a short, one-shouldered white dress. She is also empowered by her mystical abilities that allow her to vanquish the evil antagonist. Magic, power, and sexualization are closely entwined for Neptune and Alyssa, suggesting that benevolent notions about women permit feminine strength as acceptable when magically bestowed.

Alice. The protagonist of American McGee's Alice (2000, Rogue Entertainment, US), a game inspired by Lewis Carroll's Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass, was the only character to exhibit her body as a weapon in a non-sexualized manner (footage captured by Quackworth, 2009). Alice, ridden with survivor's guilt and institutionalized after losing her parents to an accidental house fire, stars in this macabre sequel to the original literary works. Like the traditional character, she wears a blue, knee-length dress with a white apron; however,

creative liberties take the form of her knee-high black boots. This overall innocent, albeit dark, depiction contrasts to Alice's enhanced abilities. In the game, Alice may acquire a power-up that physically transforms her into a manifestation of her inner demons with red skin, horns, and long clawed fingers. This monstrous appearance paired with increased physical abilities contrasts with the sexualized power-ups granted to Neptune and Alyssa.

Several allies assist Alice on her journey into Wonderland, but she largely remains a solitary force in combat as she slays enemies, emphasizing her (in)dependence. The game's major female characters are villains, such as the cannibalistic Duchess and the Red Queen, alienating Alice from female support. Her male companions meet their demises on her journey to confront the Red Queen – the physical manifestation of her survivor's guilt and self-loathing. Alice's eventual triumph over the Red Queen restores Wonderland to its former beauty and she is discharged from the asylum. Alice's narrative arc involves overcoming her worst enemy – herself – as she salvages her mental health.

Cordy. Schoolgirl Cordy of *Our Darker Purpose* (2014, Avidly Wild Games, US) fights fellow students-turned-ghouls who attempt to kill her (footage captured by ryarod, 2016). She is generally isolated from others, aside from enemies, but gameplay demonstrates she is capable of fending off feral classmates and other creatures. Although Cordy was a shy loner before the game's events, she grows into empowerment on her quest to save herself from the evil that infests her school. Cordy is isolated from strong relationships because her world gives her few alternatives.

Virgin summary. We found the depictions of the virgin characters to be more complex than the vamp characters, overall. Despite adhering to notions of protective paternalism, these women were powerful and capable fighters. They also display emotional complexity far beyond the vamp characters. Notably, Cordy and Alice demonstrated the emotional and physical strength of young girls without the presence of sexualized themes.

For most virgin characters, sexualization worked to emphasize a feminine appearance and personality. Our observations of characters in Japanese games found that young virginal-appearing girls experienced enhanced power coupled with a sexualized appearance. The most traditionally virginal character, Yorda, is the most dependent on the male hero Ico as she is entirely subservient to his actions.

Discussion

The theme of bodies as objects, bodies as weapons succinctly captures the polarizing interpretations of protagonists like Lara Croft who are simultaneously empowered by means of their actions and objectified by means of appearance (e.g. Kennedy, 2002; Carr, 2002; Herbst, 2004). The characters analyzed that were similar to the femme fatale signify hostile sexism, with their portrayal as sexually manipulative and dangerous.

The sexualization of sweet, innocent characters in Japanese games, such as Alyssa and Neptune, was paired with empowerment. These depictions were not unlike *kawaii* and *shojo* characterizations in Japanese anime, in which young girls are bestowed supernatural powers and strength in the context of sexualization (Gwynne, 2013). Such characterizations resonate with benevolent sexism because they delimit women's empowerment to the realm of fantasy.

(In)dependence suggests that character relationships were isolating and dependent. Narratives portrayed characters signifying hostile sexism as dominants or as equals to other men and women. Progressive relationships, in which women equaled their male allies and supported women, were not the standard. Nina's extreme independence alienated her from her allies.

Exaggerated independence signifies the dangerous, subversive nature of strong women as espoused by hostile sentiments.

Some characterizations aligned with dependence, such as Yorda, who relied on her male counterpart. This pattern aligns with aspects of benevolent attitudes towards women in which their subsidiary social position defines their heteronormative reliance on men. However, other characters signifying aspects of benevolent sexism, such as Juliet and Serah, were among cooperative and supportive teams in which members relied on one another as relative equals.

We noted some cultural differences. In Japanese titles, sexualization accompanied empowerment for characters signifying benevolent sexism, akin to kawaii magical girl tropes. We did not see this trend in characters from US games. Benevolent qualities are often attributed to female characters in Japanese media because they are well-received in that culture (Napier, 1998; Gwynne, 2013). The creator of the Japanese franchise Resident Evil, Shinji Mikami, aims to create strong female characters but received pressure to include a submissive character in a game: “I didn’t want to include her but the staff wanted that kind of character... in Japan, that character is pretty popular” (Stuart, 2014). This commentary underscores the pressure that developers face, potentially stemming from acculturated attitudes (e.g., ambivalent sexism) about women.

Limitations and Conclusion

By focusing on predominately narrative-driven console/computer games, we excluded games that may marginalize characters, such as games lacking stories. Additionally, most characters in this sample were White or racially ambiguous (e.g. a mix of Asian and Caucasian features), indicating that our themes are mostly limited to representations of White women in US and Japanese games.

Finally, as we sampled games across multiple years of release, we acknowledge that most of our characters are from titles released in the early 2000s (e.g., BloodRayne, Ico) to 2010s (e.g., Hyperdimension Neptunia Victory, Lollipop Chainsaw) and, thus, may not necessarily reflect current industry trends. We acknowledge and appreciate that many recent games do not feature the type of sexist content considered here.

Moreover, the analysis only contains one character from an independent studio (Cordy of Our Darker Purpose). One result of selecting characters that signify aspects of ambivalent sexism was that our sample consists of games targeting primarily male consumers. Women are more likely to engage with mobile and independent games (Chess, 2017) - genres not present in our sample. Yet, given that 61% of the most frequent game purchasers in the US are male (ESA, 2018), we believe investigating sexist themes in male-dominated genres corresponds to the concerns of such content, as well as how gender stereotypes about women may serve as a form of gatekeeping. Indeed, this study enables a comparative piece investigating ambivalent sexism in genres primarily designed and marketed towards women. Such a study would contribute to insights on character design made intentionally for female players, akin to Chess’ (2017) work on designed identity in the mobile and casual game spaces.

This essay is not an indictment of the digital games industry. Our critique considers how the prevalence of benevolent and hostile sexism within cultures and media industries/tropes may shape character design. We have also discussed how ambivalent sexist portrayals in games may manifest somewhat distinctly across cultures. Characters with traits in common with benevolent sexism in Japanese games were depicted as sexualized when empowered for battle. This pattern may be influenced by the prevalence of sexualized kawaii and shojo depictions of magical girls in Japanese media (Napier, 1998; Gwynne, 2013). Enhanced combat mechanics for these

characters coincided with sexualization, demonstrating how representation might combine with mechanics to create a complex system of (female) identity in games – an identity that is problematic and empowering. In another study, two depictions of playable femme fatales were ultimately disempowered through each game’s narrative and mechanics, such that they “function as pressure valves to release antifeminist gamers’ anxieties” (Malkowski, 2017, p. 35). Sexualizing characters with benevolent sexist traits may be a tactic to ease anxieties about femininity and power.

Meaningful characterizations signifying hostile sexism across regions of development were not found, but more research is needed on how extant media tropes influence character design as well as how mechanics intersect with representation. As research advances, this interpretive piece offers a suggestion for communication, game studies, and women’s studies scholars on how ambivalent sexism might shape the nature of content from a cultural perspective.

These critiques do not suggest that women are unable to enjoy playing as these or similar characters. Beyond physical appearances, players are likely to identify with characters’ emotional responses and narrative journeys (Shaw, 2014); thus, audience interpretations may mitigate effects of sexist visuals. Read through a lens of empowerment, characters signifying ambivalent sexism pair masculinity and femininity to problematize prescriptive gender norms.

Some female game characters signify sexist qualities, despite increasing variation in those characterizations (Lynch et al., 2016; Perreault et al., 2016). This study interpreted female characters in US and Japanese video games who signified qualities consistent with ambivalent sexism, shedding light on the social psychology behind character design in a male-dominated area of production. Yet, analysis of gender in Sierra On-line games revealed a trend towards more gender inclusivity and feminist discourse as the company involved more women and provided them with increased resources (Cox, 2018). Educating designers on the trappings of ambivalent sexism, as well as continued gender inclusion in the industry, is necessary to quell such stereotypes about women, power, and sexualization.

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