

VIOLENT VIDEO GAME PLAY: A GENDERED EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

The meteoric growth of digital gaming has had an immense impact on culture, especially the leisure practices of youth and adult in contemporary society. Digital games are the fastest growing form of media entertainment consistently outselling movie box office sales reaching \$5.8 billion dollars in 1997 (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998), \$8 billion in 1999 (Williams, 2002) and \$11.4 billion globally in 2003 (Plunkett Research., 2004). As part of the information age, computer games inform our understanding of various cultural practices, including our social relations and the social construction of violence and gender. Yet, little is known about this popular leisure activity. This is particularly true from a game player's perspective. The small body of research on "gaming" has thus far focused primarily on the causal relationship between violent game play and increased aggression. A recognized limitation by media effects scholars is the difficulty in the transference of these findings beyond a laboratory setting. Additionally, gaming research has not looked at the gendered nature of the games and the gendered violence as part of game play. As reported by Provenzo (1991) and Dietz (1998) hyper-masculine and sexist images are a prominent feature of most games, but have not been explored as an important part of the research agenda. In an effort to address these points this research utilized a qualitative methodological approach with specific focus on the gendered nature of this popular leisure pastime. The purpose of this study was to explore player's experience of gaming specific to violence and gender using a social constructionist perspective.

Methods

Using a non-probability, purposeful sampling strategy, a total of twelve self-described "avid players" of violent games were recruited. The main purpose of this sampling strategy is to locate participants with intimate knowledge of the particular phenomena of interest (Patton, 2002). The goal for this study was therefore to locate player who have an intimate knowledge of, and experience with violent game play. Recruitment was accomplished using postings at gaming arcades and direct recruitment at a high profile gaming tournament. Geographically, participants were from the larger metropolitan cities in Southwestern Ontario and the States of Pennsylvania and New York. While it was difficult to recruit female players of violent games, both genders participated in the study with a total of five female and seven male gamers. The average age of the participants was 23.5 years old, with the majority being in their early to mid twenties. Data collection consisted of in depth semi-structured interviews, field observation (at tournaments, players homes and gaming establishment), and research journal notes. Interpretation of these findings was based on the social constructionist framework as well as on feminist theoretical perspectives. The data were managed using NVivo qualitative software package, and analyzed and interpreted using inductive analysis (open, axial, and selective coding) and the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Trustworthiness of the study was established by ensuring credibility through, interview member checks, peer debriefing, progressive subjectivism and triangulation of the data. Trustworthiness was also supported through recording the

decision making process as part of the analysis and interpretation (dependability audit trail) and journaling my thoughts, subjectivities, and feelings prior to and during data collection (confirmability audit trail).

Results

The analysis led to the development of three main themes, “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly”. While data from each theme provides a broad understanding of players social construction of games the focus of this paper is centered on gender and gendered violence as discussed in the final theme.

Overall, players constructed the games as a positive and socially acceptable leisure activity. This was captured under “The Good”, which included player described positive experiences of violent game play such as, fun, gaining cognitive problem solving skills, becoming immersed or lost in the experience (“flow”), stress relief, and increased social connectedness. There was however, player recognition of some detrimental aspects of game play. These are described in the following two themes, “the Bad and the Ugly”.

The second major theme “The Bad” captured players’ acknowledged concerns about game play. These are related to the inherent violence in the games, and include player recognition of being desensitized, some violence being unpalatable or going “too far” for them, experiencing aggressive emotions, exhibiting and witnessing aggressive behaviors, and a significant level of concerns towards younger children’s access to and playing of violent video games. While player concerns were evident, most often players offset their concerns through rationalizations that support the games as “harmless” entertainment. This included drawing a parallel between gaming being similar to other leisure activities or hobbies. In further support, a prominent rationalization was player’s belief that games do not create violent people, but rather, it is mentally unbalanced people with existing violent tendencies who engage in acts of real-life violence.

The third theme of the study is related to gender and gendered violence found in the games, but also directed toward and experienced by female gamers in the study. Within the theoretical framework used in this study “feminist theory” this was thematically categorized as “The Ugly”. First, this theme includes evidence of stereotypical reproductions of gender as part of the gaming content and character representations (e.g. hyper-masculine males and sexualized female characters). The reproduction of gender was a strong component of the masculine culture of gaming. A paradox associated with this was, female gamers inadvertently “took on” some of the sexist language, in order to compete in this masculine culture, thereby playing a role in the reproduction of gender. Second, as well as the stereotypical gender representations, it was also revealed that a large portion of the violence in the games is gendered violence targeted towards female characters or any other non-hegemonic forms of masculinity (e.g. disempowered characters based on race or sexuality). “Yah, GTA [Grand Theft Auto] is fun! One of the ways you can get your health back is by sleeping with hookers. It is sort of amusing because then you can beat the hell out of her and kill her, taking your money back”. Third, a significant finding of this study was that there was also evidence that gendered violence was not just part of the game content, but was also experience by the female gamers as described by their experience of misogynistic and/or discriminatory behaviors directed toward them because they are female players. This included sexually derogatory or hateful comments towards female gamers (e.g. “suck my dick bitch, and go

back to the kitchen”), the use of pornographic props to intimidate female players (e.g. “It is really uncomfortable because you can have your own graffiti spray in the game and guys who play have porno sprays, like naked girls doing nasty stuff to guys and stuff), and simulated acts of sexual assault, rape and necrophilia carried out as part of the game play (e.g. “Like if you are a girl player they would take out their knife and do some kind of sexual thing to you, like when your character is dead and lying on the ground”). While this unfavorable aspect for the female gamers was negative, therefore differentiating their experience of gaming from the experience of male gamers, this also led to female gamers’ resistance. This “spillover” of the game content gendered violence into actual behaviors toward female players had a substantial effect on female versus male players’ experience of gaming. The female gamers viewed the games as a fun leisure past-time but also as a socio-political act of resistance against the discriminatory practices against girls that exist within the gaming culture. They were able to maintain their participation and reformulate some of their gaming experiences through their “girrrrl power” camaraderie and the creation of female friendly spaces to play.

Discussion

The meanings and experiences associated with game play contributed to the social construction of gender and violence, as well as to the intersection of the two. Player’s perspectives indicated various ways in which video games contribute not only to the acceptance and normalization of violence and violent images, but also to the reinforcement of traditional notions of gender and to the perpetuation of gendered violence. At the same time, the different perspectives of the female versus the male players provided evidence that, for the female players at least, game playing can act as a site for resistance to the sexism and misogyny associated with video games. Thus it is clear from this study that violent video games, not unlike other forms of leisure, can act as a conduit for both the reproduction and the resistance of gender, violence, and gendered violence (Green, 1998; Shaw, 2001; WRLA, 1996). In doing so female players may also, consciously or sub-consciously, be using the games as a site for politicized action (Shaw, 2001).

Application and Implications

As Rojek (2000) notes, much can be gained from understanding how the media works, and how people use and are being used by the media including the cultural implications related to this. Overall, this research makes a contribution to the sociological and cultural understanding of the popular leisure activity of digital gaming as it pertains to human relations and the social construction of gender. The cultural implications related to the violence and the gendered aspect of the gaming experience has important applications for a number of human service areas. Additionally, given that media violence has been of concern to parents, educators, the general public and social scientists for the past thirty years, it is hoped that this project provides a greater understanding of the nature of digital gaming that is relevant to recreation practitioners, public policy makers, social service workers, and the general public.

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