

Research in Practise

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Introduction

In this proposal, I will be discussing 3 keywords that I hope to build a question around for my dissertation. I will be looking at gender and storytelling within gaming. As I have been an avid gamer from a young age who has seen how the gaming industry has changed, I am interested in researching and discussing this topic. I will be exploring the history of gaming and how it has evolved through time. Following on I will look at how the gaming industry has changed to involve more women and because of that fact, how storytelling is different due to an increased female audience.

Gaming

“The activity of playing video games” (Cambridge advanced learner's dictionary)

What is considered to be the first ever video game was created in 1952 by a British professor called A.S Douglas. The game was called OXO which is more familiarly known as noughts and crosses. He created this as part of his dissertation at the University of Cambridge (Cohen, 2019). Following on from this Physicist William Higinbotham created a simple tennis game which he called Tennis for Two in 1958. This was similar to the game Pong, a well-known classic from the 1970's. Higinbotham exhibited his game in the Brookhaven National Laboratory using an oscilloscope with a display that was only five inches in diameter. Higinbotham recalled in a magazine interview that he thought that “it might liven up the place to have a game that people could play, and which would convey the message that our scientific endeavours have relevance for society.” (October 1958: Physicist Invents First Video Game, 2021). As important as the games themselves are the consoles they are played on also play a significant role. The first ever in-home game console has been recognised as ‘The Odyssey’, which was manufactured by Magnavox and released in North America in 1972. The Odyssey was developed by Ralph Baer who was a German-American engineer. The console required separate game cards that could be inserted. The games were very basic and consisted of two paddles that players could control to hit a ball around (Lewin, 2020). Video game consoles have come a long way since The Odyssey, The top five best selling consoles worldwide are as follows

– PlayStation 2 (155 million sales), PlayStation 4 (108 million sales), PlayStation (102 million sales), Nintendo Wii (101 Million sales) and lastly the PlayStation 3 (86 Million Sales) (Yaden, 2021). Compared to the early days of consoles now players have thousands of games at their fingertips in the comfort of their homes in high quality. Not only do we have traditional gaming consoles such as the Xbox and PlayStation models – virtual reality has become the new technology that everyone wants to try at least once. Before I discuss advanced VR headsets it's important to see where the concept started. First of all what is virtual reality? - "A set of images and sounds, produced by a computer, that seem to represent a place or a situation that a person can take part in" (Cambridge advanced learner's dictionary). Excluding the use of computers, the basic concept of virtual reality is creating the illusion we are somewhere we are not whether it is through images or sounds or a combination of both. Due to this the earliest examples of this could be attributed to panoramic paintings from the 19th century such as Figure 1 below (History Of Virtual Reality - Virtual Reality Society, 2021).



Figure 1: Battle of Borodino (Franz Roubaud, 1912)

Paintings such as these give the viewer a 360 view of a situation which places them in the scene and makes them feel present. The first VR head mounted display that was connected to a computer and not a camera was created by Ivan Sutherland and his student Bob Sproull in 1968, which was called the Sword of Damocles and was the starter for the VR headsets we're familiar with today (History Of Virtual Reality - Virtual Reality Society, 2021). The Oculus Rift was the first notable headset to hit the market. It operates by using a simple rectangular visor with a lengthy wire that connects

to your PC accompanied by a singular external sensor that tracks the user wearing the headset and rounded controllers. In 2016, the Oculus Rift sold 145,000 units three months after its release (Vailshery, 2018). “The global augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) market is forecast to reach 18.8 billion U.S. dollars in 2020. This would be an increase of over 78 percent over spending in 2019” (Alsop, 2021). The gaming industry has exploded in popularity over the last 25 years and it was predicted that in 2018 the global video game market would be worth approximately 115 billion US dollars (Clement, 2021). Video game sales have gone through the roof in recent times with ever-increasing exciting concepts and even better quality and performance. Gaming has always been an activity individuals have used for entertainment in their downtime as a general means to relax. A survey taken between March 16-22 2020 showed a 63% increase in video game sales – likely due to so many people having an abundance of free time (Clement, 2021). As more people have undoubtedly dealt with more mental issues during the pandemic due to prolonged isolation, unemployment, stress etc. It’s interesting to see that individuals have been using video games to improve their general mental well-being. A study by Oxford University used gameplay data from the games Animal Crossing and Plants vs. Zombies in correlation with psychological questionnaires, and reported that individuals who played more games tended to report greater “well-being”. This is particularly exciting as for years it has been said that video games are bad for your health overall but especially mental health.

Gender

“The physical and/or social condition of being male or female” (Cambridge advanced learner's dictionary)

From a young age I have always enjoyed playing video games and being a girl I didn’t realise until I was a little older, that it’s not all that common for females to play video games compared to males. 9 out of 10 times that I would play with friends online they were male, very rarely would I find other

female players. I acknowledge that my love for video games came from watching and playing games with my older brother and I assume other girls have been influenced in a similar way. Over the last several years there has been a noticeable increased female audience that enjoy video games. “There are suggestions that gamers are a much more diverse bunch. Whilst 20 percent of video gamers worldwide were, indeed, males between the ages of 21 and 35, some 13 percent were females aged between 36 and 50” (Clement, 2021). Although that percentage is quite low globally, a female audience increases vastly in Europe. Here are some statistics gathered by ISFE that support this fact – “45% of all European video game players are female.” “Women make up 51% of all European mobile/tablet players.” “Women who play video games are three times more likely to study for a STEM degree than that that do not play video games.” Additionally The Insights People’s conducted a survey of five thousand children under the age of 18 found that, “84 percent of teen girls surveyed reported spending some of their free time playing video games up from 75 percent in 2017. Games as a hobby overall has overtaken shopping and is now ranked the 8th most popular hobby for young girls.” This shows an obvious audience shift towards women compared to how male dominated the gaming industry used to be 5-10 years ago. Not only has there been a shift in more women playing video games, there’s also been changes in what type of games women play. In Europe “86% of women play single-player modes, 23% online multiplayer modes and 16% offline multiplayer modes” (ISFE, 2020). Results from a study in 2012 showed, “Men overwhelmingly played more violent video games than women. However, women tend to play both violent and non-violent almost equally. Male gamers were more likely than female gamers to be drawn to games from the Strategy, Role Playing, Action, and Fighting genres whereas female gamers were more likely than male gamers to play games from the Social, Puzzle/Card, Music/Dance, Educational/Edutainment, and Simulation genres” (Phan, Jardina, Hoyle, and Chaparro, 2012). Figure 2 below correlates with this theory albeit these statistics are from 2016 so these figures reflect how women are branching out to other genres.

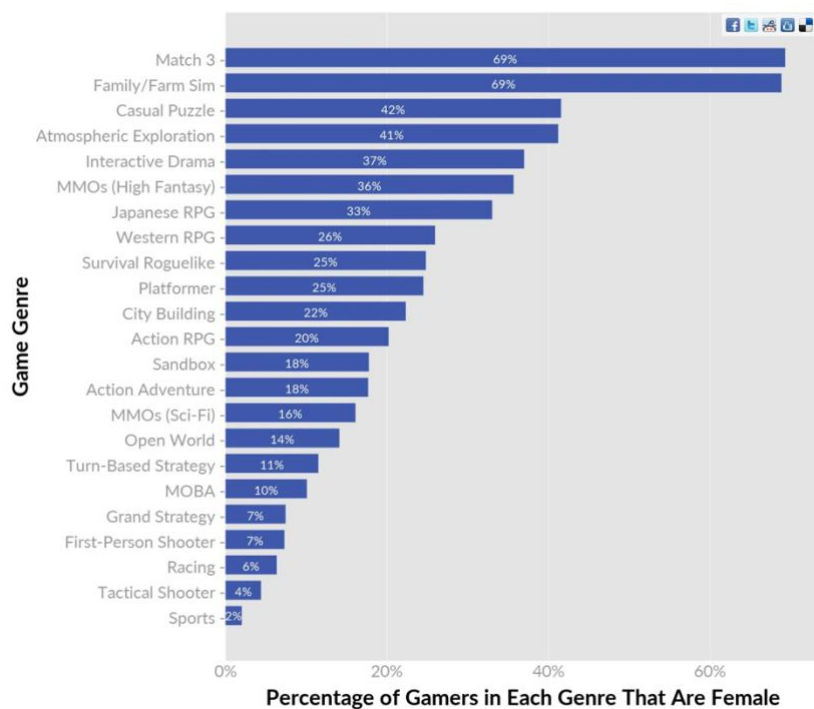


Figure 2: Percentage of Gamers in Each Genre That Are Female(Nick Yee, 2016)

This overall increase of women playing video games and experimenting with different genres can be attributed to a few things and vary from country to country. A Journal reported that female gamers who play role-playing games were found to have “low self-esteem, use games as a modality to feel good, seek feeling of achievement by defeating others, and enhancing of social ties with other gamers through online chatting” (Sharma et al., 2019) Similarly it was found “Western female gamers also look for competition or success and appreciation through competition” (Sharma et al., 2019). Another study that focused on Taiwanese gamers directly conflicted with the previous study as they found that, “More males than females played online games to pursue feelings of achievement and to make friends, whereas more females than males played online games for the purpose of passing time” (Ko et al., 2005). These studies highlight that the female player gaming population is quite complex and that they don’t have a set particular reason for playing video games.

Storytelling

“The activity of writing, telling, or reading stories” (Cambridge advanced learner's dictionary)

Despite there being a higher female audience for video games, there still isn't a lot of improvement in terms of female representation in video games. The first playable female character in a game was Samus Aran from the 1986 Metroid game (Harveston, 2017). Princess Peach from Mario and Princess Zelda from The Legend of Zelda are used as damsels in distress that the male protagonist must rescue which reinforces stereotypes that women are weak and can't rescue themselves. Arguably the first 'strong' female character is Lara Croft. Despite her character being portrayed as strong she is dressed in a tiny top that bares her midriff and tight shorts, which has been looked down upon by many for focusing on her sexuality rather than her strength. This coincides with the main audience for the Lara Croft games being male and the creators likely creating her to mould to the 'male gaze'. As a huge improvement in the newer games Lara Croft now wears a tank top and trousers and represents a strong female figure. A game that has come under fire for perpetuating violence against women is the grand theft auto game series. For example in one of the games there is a challenge to kill as many women as possible and another instance where the male protagonist is urged to grope a female stripper repeatedly until they are caught by a background character. This has raised concerns as people believe that seeing violence towards women in realistic video games will lead to normalisation of this violence (Harveston, 2017). Although representation is becoming better the common issues shown in female characters are hyper-sexualisation and no intelligent input to narrative. Disregarding how women are portrayed in general, the vast difference in representation of male and female characters is disappointing. Feminist Frequency looked at every game featured at every major E3 press conference for that year, and found that out of the 76 games featured, only seven of them centred female heroes—less than 10 percent. Meanwhile, more than three times as many games, over 30 percent of the total, centred male heroes (Sarkeesian and Petit, 2019). Figure 3 below shows the data laid out in easy to read terms.

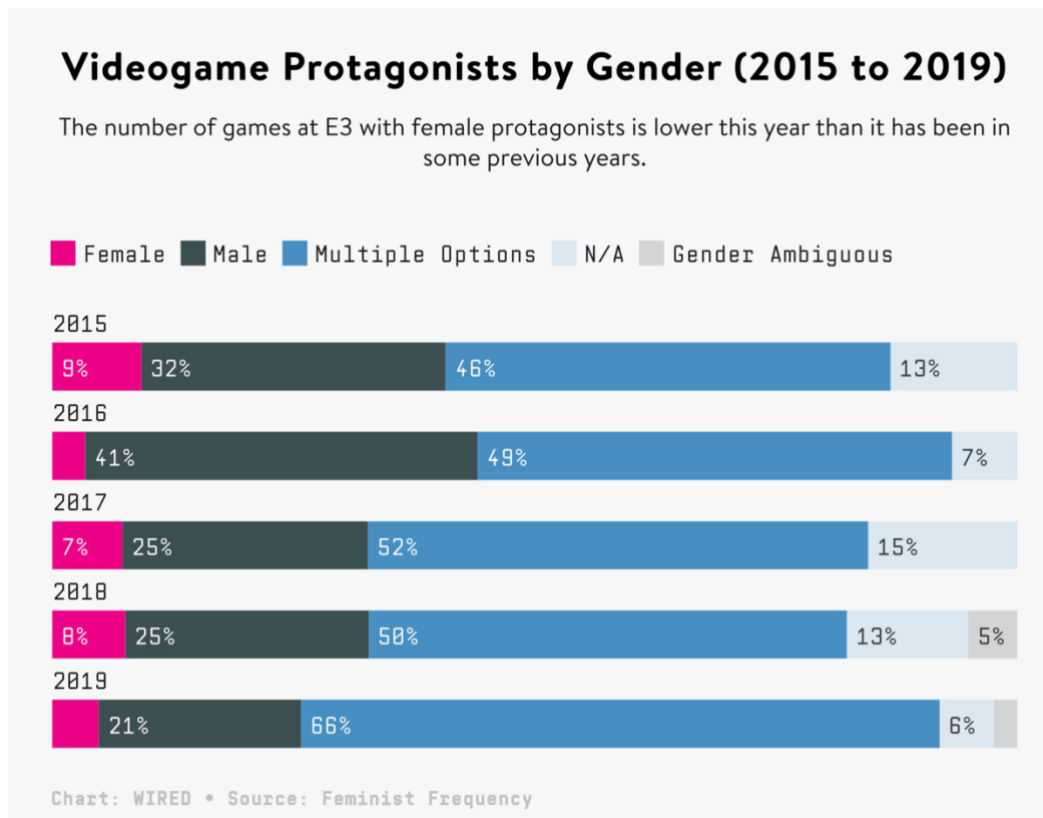


Figure 3: Video Game Protagonists by Gender (Feminist Frequency, 2017)

Although there is still a lot of improvement needed in the gaming industry to be more inclusive of women, there are changes being made. In 2016, just two percent of video games had female protagonists, but this figure jumped to 18 percent in 2020 (Clement, 2021). One of the most notable games with a strong female lead recently is *The Last of Us* part 2. Although she was the sidekick to the male protagonist in the first game, she was still a strong independent character and now as the main female protagonist to the series she is a strong heroine figure. Stepping away from the representation of female characters themselves, I will talk shortly about women being represented in the industry at whole. Nationally the Women in Games Ambassador program, has 12 Corporate and 446 individual ambassadors across the world who are working to support women and girls better understand the games industry. Their aim is to double the number of women in games over 10 years (Yokoi, 2021). #Raisethethegame is a UK-based initiative that encourages companies to make their workplace more inclusive. Over 100 companies have already signed up to it such as Xbox, Facebook Gaming, and EA. Encouragingly in #Raisethethegame's first annual report, it was

shown that hiring practices and efforts to create more inclusive titles have improved (Yokoi, 2021).

Conclusion

After exploring these 3 keywords and researching and analysing them I have found many links between gaming, gender and storytelling. The question I have identified throughout this has been 'has the gaming industry evolved to be inclusive of women in its industry and how are women portrayed?' I have always been interested in video games in their entirety. I enjoy the many stories and styles that are born from the game teams imaginations. But even though I enjoy all that comes with it I am not blind to the issues that are prevalent within the industry. As a woman who has dealt with seeing misrepresentation and over sexualisation of my gender in the industry I think it's important to highlight the issues and get to the root of the cause. Although the question I posed may not be my final it will be a good starting point. There are various areas in this essay I have discussed and could delve more into such as, feminism, stereotyping, violence towards women, portrayal, separate online identity, male gaze, technology etc. All these areas have been considered as focus for my dissertation question next year.

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