Researcher examines racial and gender representation in top 50 video games

June 4 2014, by Stephen Shoemaker

Violence in video games has been a topic on the political and media radar for decades. But research conducted by a recent graduate from Ithaca College examines the medium through different lenses: racial and gender bias.

Ross Orlando is a lifelong gamer and sociology major with a minor in African diaspora studies. He decided to merge his passion for video games and race studies in this research.

"Race is [a topic] that pervades society in a lot of different ways and has a lot of hidden meanings—especially as portrayed in media—that really

interested me in terms of decoding and learning everything I could about it," he said.

Orlando broke down main, playable [characters](#) in the top 10 most-highly rated games for each year from 2007-2012. He chose his sample pool from GameRankings.com, which aggregates reviews from major gaming websites.

"I either played or had beaten a good number of the games that ended up going into the study," Orlando said. "So it gave me a head start and gave me more time to do the analysis rather than having to play through the games." He also made use of online walk-throughs on YouTube for games he didn't play.

He analyzed a variety of characteristics, both simple and nuanced, including race, sex, age group, level of violence or passivity, whether the character is portrayed in a hyper-sexual manner, and whether they convey traits such as loyalty or smugness. The research even examined the racial makeup of the protagonists' foes, when applicable.

Orlando outlined these character audits in his paper titled "Race and Gender: A Look at Modern Video Games," which was presented this spring during the James J. Whalen Academic Symposium.

Engendered Differences

Some of his findings won't be a surprise to those familiar with the [gaming industry](#). For example, of the 61 protagonists assessed across the 50 titles, only five are female (8 percent total); of those five, only two are the main protagonist of the [game](#).

While the minimal sample of female protagonists in the games Ross researched made the study of gender bias a smaller part of the study, he

still sees important implications in how men and women are portrayed in games.

"[Gender] is another broad topic that is very important in day-to-day life and has an interesting intersection with race, and their effects together," he said.

Racial Omission

Racial diversity is lacking in these games, as well. Black and Asian characters each have 3 percent representation in the pool of main protagonists; Latino a mere 1 percent. There are no representations of Indigenous peoples among playable characters. White protagonists, on the other hand, comprise 67 percent of main characters in the games.

"I feel like race is either seen in this culture as stereotypes to mock or not seen at all. The narrative of colorblindness is dangerous and one that is taught from a very early age," he said.

In terms of video games specifically, though, he notes in his paper, that "there were little signs of blatant racial stereotypes present outside of racism by omission."

Of the games developed in Japan, Orlando notes that 75 percent feature white main characters. "Which was kind of the most interesting finding. I attribute that, more than anything, to business and marketing to the large markets that are North America and Europe."

Hyped-Up Attributes

The games developed in Japan and Western Europe also contain the highest percentage of hyper-sexualized protagonists (male or female) at

15 percent and 11 percent respectively. Hyper-sexualized characters in the games developed in the United States appear in only 4 percent of the sample.

Of the 45 male characters in the games, Orlando found one-third exhibited stereotypical masculine qualities such as hyper-aggressiveness.

He notes that stereotypes of women in scant clothing and behaving in hyper-sexualized manner, and of men as muscular and hyper-aggressive, are the same stereotypes seen in other media, such as movies or comics. "This helps perpetuate the dominant narrative of 'how men and women should be,'" he writes in his paper.

Orlando acknowledges that this his study is relatively shallow in depth, but he hopes his research – and similar work in the future – could kick start serious conversations in the gaming industry about the ways characters are – and aren't – portrayed.

Study Sample

These 50 games were included in Ross Orlando's research:

- Journey (2012)
- Mass Effect 3 (2012)
- Xenoblade Chronicles (2012)
- Trials Evolution (2012)
- Borderlands 2 (2012)
- Mark of the Ninja (2012)
- Guild Wars 2 (2012)
- Dishonored (2012)
- Far Cry 3 (2012)
- The Walking Dead (2012)
- Batman: Arkham City (2011)

- Portal 2 (2011)
- The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2011)
- The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword (2011)
- Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception (2011)
- Gears of War 3 (2011)
- Deus Ex. Human Revolution (2011)
- Dead Space 2 (2011)
- Dark Souls (2011)
- The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings (2011)
- Super Mario Galaxy 2 (2010)
- Mass Effect 2 (2010)
- Red Dead Redemption (2010)
- God of War III (2010)
- Halo: Reach (2010)
- Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood (2010)
- Bayonetta (2010)
- Battlefield: Bad Company 2 (2010)
- Call of Duty: Black Ops (2010)
- Bioshock 2 (2010)
- Uncharted 2: Among Thieves (2009)
- Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (2009)
- Batman: Arkham Asylum (2009)
- Assassin's Creed 2 (2009)
- Killzone 2 (2009)
- Demon Souls (2009)
- Shadow Complex (2009)
- New Super Mario Bros. Wii (2009)
- Resident Evil 5 (2009)
- Dragon Age: Origins (2009)
- Grand Theft Auto IV (2008)
- Metal Gear Solid 4 (2008)
- Gears of War 2 (2008)
- Fallout 3 (2008)

- Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 4 (2008)
- Braid (2008)
- Dead Space (2008)
- Fable II (2008)
- Bionic Commando: Rearmed (2008)
- Valkyria Chronicles (2008)

Provided by Ithaca College