Research Article

Male hegemony in video games: Effects on female representation, psycholoy, and resistance

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the issue of male dominance in the video game industry and gaming community. Female game characters in video games are often over-sexualized to suit male preferences due to mainstream social consciousness. This practice not only disregards the needs and experiences of female gamers, but also reinforces gender stereotypes and hurts gender equality. This kind of disrespect and harm to women further spreads to real social life, which is not conducive to women's physical and mental health. The paper analyses how male hegemony is manifested through the marginalization of women, the distortion of women's representation, and the objectification of women as objects of male desire from the perspective of social psychology. In addition, the paper explores how gaming mechanics control women in games and real life and further exacerbate this problem by creating 'second selves' that perpetuate gender norms. The paper argues for the need to challenge this male dominance and discusses how women can actively resist this dominance in society and the gaming community. Finally, the paper calls for a more inclusive and gender-equitable gaming culture to improve the gaming experience for all players, as well as to promote respect for women in society.

Keywords: Video games; Female figures; Gender stereotypes; Femininity; Hegemonic masculinity; Social Psychology

1. Introduction

It is worth noticing that one of the crucial phenomena in video games is that the games are still perceived as a male-dominated space, and many hyper-sexualized female game characters remain products of male hegemony. Such representations not only reflect outdated and harmful stereotypes but also contribute to a gaming culture that often marginalizes the experiences and needs of female gamers. By prioritizing male fantasies and desires in character design, game narratives, and marketing strategies, this phenomenon not only ignores the feelings and needs of female gamers, but also threatens to exacerbate gender stereotypes, undermining the gaming experience of female gamers as well as working against gender equality in society. Thus, this paper aims to focus on the pervasive male hegemony within both the gaming industry and the user community. By analyzing how this hegemony fosters a culture that privileges male perspectives, the paper will explore the mechanisms through which women are isolated, misrepresented, and

objectified as mere objects of the male gaze. This analysis will highlight how such portrayals not only diminish the diversity of narratives available in video games but also create a hostile environment for women, where their contributions and experiences are minimized or ignored. Meanwhile, to facilitate this examination, this paper will use the concepts of social psychology to aid in analyzing how male hegemony is created and shaped in society and games. By investigating the ways in which socialization processes, group dynamics, and cognitive biases shape attitudes toward gender in gaming, can gain insights into the roots of this inequality. Furthermore, the paper will delve into how specific gaming mechanics contribute to the phenomenon of the "second self". This identification can lead to greater objectification of female characters, as players navigate virtual worlds where female avatars are frequently designed to cater to male preferences. By examining these mechanics, the paper will uncover how they not only reinforce harmful stereotypes but also catalyze discussions among female gamers about their experiences and resistance to such portrayals. This resistance is vital in challenging the status quo and advocating for a more inclusive and equitable gaming environment that respects and values the contributions of all players, regardless of gender.

With the widespread popularity of video games, according to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), approximately 55% of players in America are male, and 45% of players are female[1]. The increasing number and participation of female gamers signifies a change in the future of gaming culture. In 2019, *NBA2K* introduced 12 WNBA teams in *NBA2K2O,* allowing players to control WNBA players[1]. This announcement was significant because it not only provided a new gaming experience from a female perspective but also recognized the public representation of female players within the invisible female sports culture. Noticeably, by presenting WNBA players as non-sexualized figures, *NBA2K* clearly promotes gender equality. Yet, game producers like *NBA2k20* cannot be found easily since most industries stick to their majority users (male users) and thus continuously misrepresent women characters to maintain the hegemonic masculine environment. It is essential to examine the gender context that has encouraged continuous male control over both gaming industries and the player communities, leading to the development of marginalized and sexually objectified women figures. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the systematic focus on men and male preference to sustain their dominant position in specific environments, especially when men become the majority in the space[1]. This privilege promotes dominant masculinity while hindering women's progress through exclusion and marginalization, which further motivates gender inequality. According to Beasley and Standley's study of gender role stereotyping in 47 games, it was found that the ratio of male to female characters was approximately 5:1, with a significantly higher proportion of male characters. In addition to being significantly underrepresented overall, female characters were also designed to be sexually appealing. Female characters were shown to be six times more likely to have low-cut necklines, and 41% of female characters whose breasts were visible were described as voluptuous[2]. Thirdly, the design of such roles is inseparable from the hegemonic machismo embodied in the gaming industry that reinforces the belief that video games are a male activity and male-dominated by restricting the participation of female programmers and female game designers in production and innovation. In 2014, only 22% of female employees were involved in the video game industry[3]. This lack of participation is not due to women's inability to be excellent programmers and game designers, but rather it is because female workers are marginalized in the gaming industry. In Lynch et al.'s research of video games in the past 31 years, studios have always tended to ignore women's voices, and female workers in the early period faced low salaries and restricted upward mobility opportunities compared to men[3], even if they chose to continue their careers in the gaming field, they struggled to find a "place" in-game industries with only one-in-ten colleagues are women[4]. Unequal benefits and inclusion limit the participation of female workers and widen the gender gap in the gaming industry. Furthermore, the dominance of male workers in the gaming industry

has led to a culture where the male perspective is the only perspective, and they typically portray female characters in game design as they wish to satisfy their desires by sexually objectifying female figures. Subsequently, such designs by male producers usually appeal to male players, which has led to the creation of a hegemonic system in video games where male producers use objectified females to support the preferences and dominance of male users in video games[3]. As a result, male dominance in the gaming industry not only marginalizes female workers and sexually objectifies female characters, leading to gender inequality in the gaming industry, but also the hegemony causes male workers to tend to cater to the preferences of male users, which further exacerbates the marginalization and objectification of women.

Second, some concepts of social psychology can be effective in explaining the formation of male hegemony in society and games. Society provides individuals with socialization into gender roles through a variety of means, including the family, school, and the media[5]. In this process, males are often encouraged to display attributes of strength, competitiveness, and independence, while females are expected to exhibit more traits of gentleness, dependence, and submissiveness. This differentiation of gender roles has resulted in the male role having more mastery and leadership, which in turn has resulted in male dominance in society. Many studies have shown that men's pursuit of power and status is closely related to their socialization process. Men are often taught to win in competition, and in order to achieve this goal, they may adopt strategies to suppress women in order to maintain their own superiority and social status. Such a model subconsciously maintains the structure of male hegemony and further reinforces gender inequality. In addition, group identity theory in social psychology states that individuals tend to shape their self-identity by belonging to a particular group[6]. Thus, in this identification, male groups may exclude women in order to reinforce internal solidarity, which not only enhances cohesion among men, but also further entrenches the male-dominated social structure. In this approach, while male groups continue to exclude women, they also invariably maintain their own power structure, making women even more marginalized in society and their groups. The formation of male hegemony is also closely related to sexist bias in social perception. According to research[7], people often judge others by stereotypes, and in social stereotypes, men are usually seen as having more leadership and decision-making skills, while women are seen as more suited to caring and supportive roles. These stereotypes contribute significantly to the cognitive biases that not only influence individual behaviors and attitudes but also shape societal perceptions of men's and women's competence on a broader scale. In everyday life, perceptions of men's and women's capabilities are shaped by these stereotypes, which further entrenches male dominance and leads to limited opportunities for women in all fields. Beyond this, the logic of male hegemony is deeply rooted in cultural and historical traditions. The cultural perception of men as the mainstay of the family and society has been reinforced throughout history, making male dominance a widely accepted norm. This cultural inheritance has been perpetuated not only within the family but also at all levels of society, creating a deeply rooted gender inequality. The persistence of such traditional attitudes has made male hegemony, which still has a strong influence in modern society, a structural problem that needs to be changed urgently.

The deep-rooted notion of male hegemony is not only rooted in real society but still exists even in the fictional world of network games. In the game industry, which is dominated by male developers, their creative direction and design concepts are often centered on the preferences of male gamers, which tends to marginalize or even deliberately exclude female characters in games. During the game design process, male developers construct female characters according to their 'vision' of women, which is often influenced by traditional gender roles. As a result, female characters in games are usually portrayed as dependent on male characters for their existence, lacking independence and competence. Such portrayals not only diminish the sense of power of female characters, but also place them in a subordinate position within the game narrative,

further exacerbating the objectification of women. For example, in many action or role-playing games, the appearance of female characters is often over-gendered, with designs that emphasize their attractiveness at the expense of their abilities and personalities. Such designs not only reflect male developers' stereotypes of women but also influence players' perceptions of female characters, making women's presence in games more of a tool to fulfill male players' fantasies than an independent, full-fledged character. In addition, social interactions in games often reflect the perpetuation of male hegemony. In many online gaming communities, female players may face harassment and discrimination from male players, further making them feel excluded. Such environments not only make female players uncomfortable when participating in games, but may also prevent them from actively participating in the development and design of games, creating a vicious cycle. To synthesise, the perpetuation of the notion of male hegemony is particularly evident in online games, influencing the game's design, narrative and social interactions. This not only exacerbates the marginalization and objectification of women in games but also reflects wider social-gender inequality. As a result, analyzed from a social psychological perspective, the underlying logic and causes of male hegemony in society and games are multi-layered. The phenomenon involves not only the psychological needs of the individual driving it, but also the intertwining and influence of multiple social factors. Understanding these underlying logics and causes can help to more effectively address and challenge the phenomenon of male hegemony and promote the process of gender equality.

In addition to the hegemonic masculine culture created by male game workers and male players in gaming communities, the mechanics of video games have contributed to creating a hegemonic masculine culture in gaming communities. Video games' flexible, manipulative, and interactive mechanic features create a second self-phenomenon that projects players' minds into the game characters[8]. The projection goes beyond mere role-playing and involves a deeper psychological and emotional connection between the player and the character. On the one hand, for male gamers, controlling a female character can produce narcissistic satisfaction as they are able to experience idealized female images and behaviors through the character, an immersion experience that blurs the boundaries between player and character, subject and object[8]. For example, Lara Croft in the game *Tomb Raider Franchise* is favored and used by male gamers as a female character of her highly sexualized body and thwarting enemy aggression. In this game, male players can manipulate Lara Croft into sexual poses and sexual dances through programs designed to do so. Besides, the controlling sexualized characterization also helps male players to better gaze at female characters, as they can view their breasts and under skirts in a three-dimensional, full-angle design. It can be seen that male players use a female perspective to experience games because video games enable male gamers to gain a sense of satisfaction when controlling female characters in the virtual world. At the same time, by interacting with and manipulating female characters in the game, male players further reinforce their desire to objectify and control women and internalize gender prejudice and inequality. However, these two unique mechanisms of video games make the internalization process more hidden and profound, as gamers are not only passively accepting the sexualized content but also actively participating in it. The active participation also builds up a distorted perception of gender relations in players' psyches, which contributes to the fact that they may hold similar gender biases in real life as well. At the same time, as Taylor points out, "As we move through the screen into the virtual community, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass"[9]. Game avatars reflect players' expectations of self-representation and the ideal appearance when interacting with people[9]; players tend to take on the role that resonates most with them. On the other hand, female gamers are also drawn into the masculine ideology through the characters they choose to play. Taking Lara Croft as another example, she is a strong female character with an independent personality and an adventurous spirit, which makes Lara Croft appealing to both female and male gamers as a choice and a

favorite. Therefore, playing Lara Croft as a second self encourages female players to strive for Lara Croft's stereotypical body image, bringing them closer to the ideal. This leads to body anxiety and loss of self-confidence and reinforces the assumption that women can pressure themselves into accepting stereotypical social norms and self-objectification[10]. It follows that the limited representation of women in hegemonic masculine gaming cultures also forces female players to choose sexualized images for self-identification if they are involved in video games. Both examples demonstrate that hegemonic masculinity in video games achieves the objectification of women in both male and female players' perceptions through the portrayal of sexualized female characters. Therefore, the culture of hegemonic masculinity in games and its specific mechanics increases gender stereotypes and affects the gaming experience of female gamers. These power dynamics and the specific mechanics in games are worrying in that not only can women be objectified in games, but this objectification can also translate to out-of-game environments, where they may receive sexualized comments or be harassed[11].

Thus, it is imperative that female gamers, female game producers, and women's groups, more generally, actively counteract the predominantly male hegemony of the video gaming field. Nowadays, many communities and organizations are working to protect women's participation and rights in the gaming industry by providing a safe and supportive space for women. For example, *Women in Games*, an international organization, has built a network to support women game developers by increasing women's participation in all areas of game development, design, production, and management, providing opportunities for women's career development and growth, and working to promote gender equality, inclusivity, and diversity. Moreover, as society becomes more aware of gender equality, an increasing number of women have had the opportunity to enter the gaming industry, with an increasing percentage of women working on each version of a video game series [12]. Female workers have created many diverse and inclusive female characters for the gaming industry and have also gone some way to improve the traditional mechanics in games to bring a more balanced and inclusive approach to the user's operational and interactive experience. Instead of portraying female characters as beautiful and sexy, they focus on their unique personalities, such as strengths and upbringing. For example, in *Celeste*, an indie game designed by Canadian video game designer Maddy Thorson, the main character, Madeline, is a young girl who, like many girls in reality, may sometimes feel frustrated and anxious, but she is brave enough to explore and face challenges which resonate with many female players. Also, a wide range of female groups has realized the importance of attacking the stereotypical image of women in gaming and upholding gender equality. Furthermore, many women who have become game anchors, media creators, and bloggers influence public opinion and gaming culture by creating content. They use their platforms to reveal and criticize gender stereotypes in games, the phenomenon of misogyny, and the inherent effects of the game's mechanics, powerfully attacking male hegemony in gaming and calling for fairer and more inclusive game design. Among them, Anita Sarkeesian, an award-winning media critic and the founder and executive director of Feminist Frequency is the creator and host of a video series, "Tropes vs. Women in Video Game". Anita analyzed the issue of gender in video games in detail, which has attracted a great deal of public attention and discussion, which has led to more gaming companies having to begin to pay attention to and reshape the portrayal of women in their games. For example, in the action-adventure game *A Plague Tale: Innocence*, despite the fact that the game is led by a male designer, Kevin Choteau, the representation of women in the game is outstanding. The female protagonist is Amicia de Rune, a girl of only 15 years old, but she bravely fights her enemies with her young brother in the face of soldiers from the Inquisition and swarms of numerous rats. It is worth noting that although there are male characters in this game (such as Hugo, Amicia de Rune's brother), the game still mainly features strong, independent, powerful female characters, and Hugo is just a supporting character

who helps Amicia de Rune with some specific tasks. Ultimately, the collective action of female gamers, producers, and advocacy groups is crucial for dismantling the barriers imposed by male hegemony. By actively participating in the conversation and pushing for systemic changes within the gaming industry, women can help cultivate a more equitable and diverse gaming culture that benefits everyone. Therefore, whether it is female players, female game producers, or the wider female community, their awakening awareness of the unfairness that exists in gaming and their active counteraction not only maintains women's health in the gaming experience and society promotes diversity and sustainability in gaming, but also contributes to the maintenance of society's respect for women and social equality in a broader societal sense.

In conclusion, the prevalence of male hegemony in the gaming industry and within player communities manifests as a significant marginalization and disrespect toward women. The gaming industry, largely shaped by male creators, often prioritizes the interests and preferences of male players. Consequently, female characters are frequently designed to reflect hyper-sexualized bodies, which are unrealistic representations of real women. This objectification and sexualization have far-reaching implications, not only damaging women's mental and physical health but also normalizing harmful stereotypes and perpetuating oppression. Meanwhile, the concepts from social psychology also illuminate the construction and perpetuation of male hegemony both in society at large and within the gaming realm. By examining the influence of socialization processes, group dynamics, and cognitive biases on attitudes toward gender in gaming, the roots of the pervasive inequality can be uncovered. These underlying mechanisms not only helps individuals to grasp the complexities of gender dynamics in gaming but also provides a foundation for challenging and changing the status quo, ultimately paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable environment for all gamers. Furthermore, in terms of gaming mechanics, the interactive and manipulative nature of many games enables male players to adopt a female-identified "second self." This phenomenon can lead to a distorted understanding of femininity, as male gamers may engage with female avatars in ways that reinforce objectifying views. When women encounter sexualized content in games, it triggers a high level of latent comparisons and self-objectification. This pressure forces women to conform to stereotypical societal norms, often leading to negative self-perceptions and diminished self-esteem. Moreover, the implications of male hegemony extend beyond the gaming world into broader social contexts. In both virtual environments and real life, the subconscious suppression and deprivation of women by men contribute to a cycle of inequality. This phenomenon can have detrimental effects on gaming communities, where the exclusionary practices and toxic behaviors fostered by these dynamics create hostile environments for female players. The gaming spaces, which should ideally serve as arenas for pleasure and creativity, risk becoming sites of oppression and conflict instead. Recognizing this urgent need for change, it is essential to actively counteract male hegemony in video games. This involves amplifying the voices of the female community and incorporating their perspectives into game design and storytelling. By introducing female characters that embody gender equality, empowerment, and complexity, the industry can challenge existing stereotypes and create more authentic representations of women. A non-sexual-aggressive gaming culture not only enhances the gaming experience for female players but also plays a critical role in fostering inclusivity and diversity within gaming communities. By promoting environments that celebrate varied narratives and identities, we can cultivate spaces where all players feel valued and respected. Such a shift is not merely beneficial for female gamers; it enriches the entire gaming landscape, encouraging creativity, collaboration, and a deeper understanding of diverse experiences. Ultimately, redefining the narrative around gender in gaming is crucial for building a more equitable and enjoyable gaming culture for everyone.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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