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Gender Role Portrayal in Digital Media and Its Evolution in Video Games

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Short outline

Introduction

Chapter I: Literature Review

- 1.1. Representations of Gender in the Media
- 1.2. The Construction of Gender in Digital Media and Video Games
- 1.3. Gamer Culture and Toxic Masculinity
- 1.4. Feminist Media Criticism

Chapter II: Theoretical Framework

- 2.1. Media, Technology, and Social Transformation
- 2.2. Gender, Power, and Historical Construction
- 2.3. Feminist Theory, Performativity, and Masculinity
- 2.4. Digital Media, Video Games, and Gender Representation

Chapter III: Methodology

- 3.1. Research Approach and Design
- 3.2. Participant Profiles (Developers and Players)
- 3.3. Data Collection Process (Semi-structured Interviews)
- 3.4. Case Study Selection Criteria and Process
- 3.5. Thematic Analysis Method
- 3.6. Ethical Principles and Reliability
- 3.7. Methodological Basis: Creswell (2023)

Chapter IV: Findings

- 4.1. Themes from Developer Views
- 4.2. Themes from Player Experiences
- 4.3. Common and Differentiated Perceptions of Representation
- 4.4. An Overview of the Findings

Chapter V: Case Studies

5.1. Visual and Semantic Analysis of Sexist Representation in Games

5.2. Critical Comments Supported by Visuals

Chapter VI: Discussion

6.1. Dialog of Findings with Literature

6.2. Findings Differing from the Literature

6.3. As a New Theoretical Opening: Theory of the Cyclical Reproduction of Gendered Representation

6.4. Theoretical Expansion and Theorizing

6.5. Academic Contributions

Chapter VII: Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1. General Evaluation

7.2. Contributions of the Research

7.3. Limitations

7.4. Future Research Recommendations

ABSTRACT

Conducted within the framework of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, this study examines how video games shape and reproduce gender norms in digital media. In the digital age, identity has become a construct that is both displayed and performed. In this context, video games have evolved beyond mere entertainment tools to become cultural spaces where norms and ideological codes are reproduced or reconfigured. This study aims to examine the dynamics of gender representations in digital media through analyses of video game content, the production processes of video game developers, and the interactions between players.

Butler's concept of performativity and Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity are examined in this thesis through the lens of character designs in video games and the statements of players and video game developers. The central argument of the study is that gender norms are reproduced not only in digital media content but also throughout the processes of producing and interpreting such content.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of the qualitative research methodology. The data obtained were analyzed through thematic analysis to interpret the approaches of video game developers and players toward gender representations. Additionally, to support the descriptive findings, a critical visual-semantic analysis was applied to selected video games. The study examined the fundamental norms shaping the portrayal of female, male, and LGBTQ+ video game characters, as well as the functions of these characters within the processes of production, performance, and interpretation.

The research findings reveal that the video game industry is largely based on codes of heteronormativity, masculinity, and sexism. Key findings include the following: Female characters are frequently subjected to sexual objectification; they are depicted in limited ways as “passive,” “damsel in distress,” or in the form of the stereotypical “witch” narrative found in traditional media. Male characters conform to gender norms such as power, aggression, and leadership within the framework of the hegemonic masculinity model. LGBTQ+ characters, on the other hand, are either absent from video games or presented through stereotypes. While video game developers argue that market interests act as a barrier to diverse and realistic gender representations, player experiences have shown that digital platforms, while enabling individuals to freely express themselves, can also reinforce toxic masculinity norms.

The original contribution of this thesis to the field is the introduction of a theoretical proposal regarding the cyclical reproduction of gendered representation in digital media: the Theory of the Cyclical Reproduction of Gendered Representation. In this theory, gendered representations are not merely reflections of social reality but also building blocks that shape and reproduce that reality. This study aims to contribute to the literature on feminist media criticism by showing how the proposed theory can shed light on the intersection of digital feminism, gender representation in the media, and queer theory.

Keywords: Digital media, gender roles, video games, LGBTQ+, feminist media criticism