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Running head: *PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN DIGITAL GAMES*

“Kind of like a Barbie doll, but for grown men!”: Women Gamers’ Accounts of Female Bodies in Digital Games

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Abstract

Although various authors have argued women’s bodies in video games are unrealistically thin and large breasted, few studies have asked women who make frequent use of video games to discuss their experiences of viewing these kinds of images. In the present study, 32 women who identified as ‘women gamers’ answered an open-ended questionnaire on the portrayal of women’s bodies in video games. Responses were analysed using thematic analysis broadly informed by discursive analysis. Women presented complex accounts where they constructed themselves as informed gamers, not duped into wanting to emulate the sexualised images on display. The idealised bodies in games were constructed as pandering to the sexual fantasies of male gamers who were seen as malleable and naïve. Participants reported that they were frustrated by the prevalence of hypersexualised bodies in games, but emphasised their mastery over the gaming environment, and their ability to dismiss the images as fantasy. Implications for understanding body image in women gamers are discussed.

Key words: video games; women gamers; body image; online questionnaire; thematic analysis

“Kind of like a Barbie doll, but for grown men!”: Women Gamers’ Accounts of Female Bodies in Digital Games

There is extensive evidence that the viewing of idealised bodies in mass media can have adverse effects on the body image of both men and women (e.g. see Grogan, 2016), however comparatively little research has examined the effects on body image of interactive media such as digital games, i.e. games played on mobile devices, computers or consoles (Juul, 2010). There is some evidence that viewing digital bodies of game characters can increase body dissatisfaction, however the research that exists tends to focus on men’s dissatisfaction (Sylvia *et al.*, 2014), or on short term exposure to gaming in the laboratory environment for men and women (Bartlett & Harris, 2008).

It has been argued that most console games present a constrained set of options for women’s bodies which mirrors that seen in other media; content analyses show that images of female bodies in digital games are thinner than average (Martins, *et al.*, 2009), and are often presented as sexual objects (Dietz, 1998). Almost half of gamers are now women (ESA, 2015), and female gamers have formed a strong and supportive community (Frank, 2014), yet still receive comparatively little attention from gaming researchers.

Games can represent highly immersive media, meaning their effects may be greater than other media. Their potential for interactivity and identification with the characters in-game may mean that Western beauty standards reproduced in games are internalised to a larger extent than traditional media and pose a greater threat to how female gamers feel about their bodies (Behm-Morowitz & Mastro, 2009).

Female representation in game spaces

Gaming cultures can be problematic for women, especially spaces such as massively multiplayer online role play games (MMORPGs) like *World of Warcraft* (WoW) where large numbers of players connect online as their avatars to engage in the challenges of the game

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN DIGITAL GAMES

world. These spaces have been described as a site for enacting 'boyhood' for young adult and adult men (Burrill, 2008), or as a site for 'militarised masculinity' (Kline *et al.*, 2003). The notion of computer technology being linked to masculinity (Jenkins & Cassell, 2008) constructs women as 'other' and their gaming experiences and preferences as 'lesser' (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). Those women who do participate as players and developers can expect to be subject to increased levels of harassment online, which is often also gendered harassment (Delamere & Shaw, 2008) and which is threatening to their offline lives (Wu, 2014).

Designers of digital games are often accused of catering to an assumed male audience. More specifically, advertising strategies for mainstream games (as opposed to 'lifestyle' games such as those designed to track health objectives) assume that women are uninterested in these games (Shaw, 2012) by focusing on powerful male protagonists and female sex objects, such as the advertising strategies of popular game *Grand Theft Auto V*. Bodies of female characters in games have generally been extremely unrealistic and over-sexualised (Dill & Thill, 2007; Martins, *et al.*, 2009). For example, content analyses demonstrate that women in games mimic the unrealistically thin and large-breasted body types seen in other forms of media (Williams *et al.*, 2009) and the bodies of female characters are often presented as only partially clothed or in sexually suggestive poses and scenarios (Downs & Smith, 2010). The female bodies in digital games are most often White or have White features (McCarthy, 2015) and their shape and size adheres to Western beauty standards which generally dictate that women are slim with full breasts (Frith, 2012; Grogan *et al.*, 2013).

The impact of idealised bodies in mass media

It has been shown that thin female bodies are preferred in virtual form; people in the USA and elsewhere perceive avatar-type images of women with lower body mass index (BMI; weight relative to height) as more attractive than high-BMI images (Aghekyan, *et al.*,

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN DIGITAL GAMES

2012). Female characters which do not conform to these standards (such as trolls and orcs in WoW) are often those which are cast as villains, or 'othered' (Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012). This othering reproduces sanctions seen outside of the game world for women for not conforming to dominant body ideals (Jeffreys, 2014; Ringrose *et al.*, 2013).

There has been extensive research into the effects on women of viewing a limited range of bodies in mass media, specifically exposure to female bodies which conform to the Western 'thin ideal'. Women tend to make upward (unfavourable) comparisons to these kinds of idealised images, especially women who are already dissatisfied with their bodies (Grogan, 2016). Women with higher levels of body image self-discrepancy and increased internalisation of this thin ideal (Bessenoff, 2006) are most likely to engage in social comparison with media images and are more likely to experience negative consequences as a result. Engeln-Maddox (2005) shows that even though comparisons with idealised models may not seem logical for most women due to lack of similarity to their own bodies, the impact of these models needs to be understood within a context where these images provide valuable information about social evaluation of one's own appearance. These images may be seen as aspirational and as potential inspiration for self-improvement (Halliwel & Dittmar, 2005).

Potential consequences of idealised bodies in digital games

There is limited research which addresses whether bodies experienced on screen in digital games affect consumers in the same way that those seen in other media do. Experimental research finds that men and women experience lower body satisfaction when they have played a game in the laboratory that contained characters with idealised bodies (Bartlett & Harris, 2008; Sylvia *et al.*, 2014). However, these studies tend to focus on short term effects and do not take into account prior experiences with games. Research which does examine longer term associations between gaming experience and body dissatisfaction

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN DIGITAL GAMES

suggests that body dissatisfaction does not increase as gaming experience increases, or as age of commencement of gaming decreases (Wack & Tantleff-Dunn, 2008), suggesting a more complex relationship between exposure to gaming content and body image than is seen with other types of media.

Effects of viewing in-game bodies may be particularly troubling due to how this type of media is experienced differently from, for example, magazines and television/film. Shaw (2014) argues that although all of these methods of media are interactive, games have a particular quality in that they *require* interaction for the media to be experienced. The consequence of this required interaction may be that the adverse effects of viewing idealistic bodies may be increased relative to other media. It has been suggested that those who have played either casual games or console games can experience an intrusion of features of the game into their everyday life. Games transfer phenomena (GTP) describes reports by gamers of visual and auditory hallucinations where the game environment seemed to be present while not actually playing, experienced by an estimated 96.6 per cent of gamers (Ortiz de Gortari & Griffiths, 2016). This effect could increase the perceived relevance of the body imagery encountered in games.

There are additional variables present in digital games which are not present in other forms of media. Viewing NPCs (non-playable characters) in-game may mimic the effects of images in more passive media, but the player's character, or avatar, *itself* represents an important site for body comparison. Frequently playing as an avatar with an idealised body type may have adverse effects on body dissatisfaction due to players viewing the avatar as an extension of themselves. Research shows that female players can experience reduced self-efficacy (Behm-Morowitz & Mastro, 2009) and increased self-objectification (Fox, *et al.*, 2013) when playing with an avatar portrayed in a sexualised manner.

The present study

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN DIGITAL GAMES

Previous research has shown that women may often experience digital gaming in environments in which they are 'othered' (Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012) or treated with hostility, generally by male players and developers (Delamere & Shaw, 2008). In addition these spaces often have limited roles for women; the bodies which female digital game characters inhabit often conform to the thin ideal seen in other media (Martins *et al.*, 2009) and are presented as trivial sex objects (Dietz, 1998). There is limited research which fully explores the impact of the digital female bodies on women players. The present research aims to explore these complex and interrelated issues through the accounts of female gamers themselves using qualitative online questionnaire data analysed using thematic analysis.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited via social media using snowball sampling. The study was advertised via the first author's social networks (*Facebook* and *Twitter* networks), asking these contacts to share the link to the study with their own networks. Administrators of local *Facebook* gaming groups were asked to share the study link online with the members of their groups. The advertisement encouraged 'women gamers' to take part; participants were therefore free to utilise their own understandings of what a gamer is. Seventy women accessed the questionnaire, but only thirty-two (46%) aged between 20 and 55 years (Mean = 29.02, Median = 28.00, SD = 6.97) completed the online questionnaire in full. This level of withdrawal may seem high, however it is common for research administered online to have a much lower rate of completion than face-to-face research (as much as 15% lower, Shannon & Bradshaw, 2002).

Materials

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN DIGITAL GAMES

An online questionnaire was produced based on previous research. This was delivered using the online survey site *Qualtrics* so that participants could access and complete it anonymously. Participants gave their age and then completed 12 open ended questions about their experiences of female characters in digital games and perceptions of their impact.

Procedure

Participation was anonymous, and participants were able to withdraw at any time by closing their browser and up to two weeks after completion. Participants were told that their responses would not be confidential as extracts may be presented in publications, but would be anonymous. They were also told that they could take as long as they liked to answer the questions, should feel free to write as much as they liked, and could come back to them later. They were directed to a relevant support website at the end of the questionnaire, but were discouraged from participation if discussion of body satisfaction would be likely to cause upset. Only answers from those who had completed the whole questionnaire were used to ensure that women who wished to withdraw had their data removed before analysis.

Data Analysis Methods

To examine the data in detail, we used an eclectic approach, starting with an in-depth thematic analysis using analytic strategies such as open coding (looking for distinct themes in the data) and axial coding (relating themes to each other) broadly informed by the Grounded Theory work of Strauss and Corbin (1990) before moving on to a more in-depth thematic analysis broadly informed by discursive analysis (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Willig, 2013). Our initial analysis was 'bottom-up' and grounded in the data, to ensure that our themes were firmly based in women's accounts. This process generated several themes, which were allocated to theme clusters. Once we were confident that the main themes captured all the variation in talk, we moved on to discourse analysis. We followed the three steps suggested

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN DIGITAL GAMES

by Edwards and Potter (1992), locating themes, focusing on discursive activities, and examining how women constructed their accounts. Importantly, we considered the ways in which each of the themes was talked about, and how these different ways of speaking functioned in context. Women performed a lot of discursive work to defend their playing of games which could be seen by those outside the gaming community as damaging to women. In the analysis which follows, we highlight four key themes designed to justify game play in a context where women's bodies were idealised. Extracts are reproduced verbatim with minor changes to facilitate readability.

Reflexive Analysis

The first author identifies as a female gamer and the second author has no previous experience of gaming. We found it very useful to have two different perspectives on the data when analysing the results. Initial themes were drawn out by the second author and then revised and developed through discussion between both authors. Although there is the potential for bias when researchers have insider status, meaning that they are members of groups they are researching (Given, 2008), we felt that these potential challenges were ameliorated in this study through having two women with contrasting understandings of this area involved in the research. The advantages of understanding the sub-culture with which we were working outweighed the potential disadvantages; the first author was able to inform the second author regarding the meaning and significance of game-specific terminology and begin to link findings to current debates in the female gaming community and the second author was able to contribute expertise on issues related to body image.

Analysis

Women presented complex accounts where they expressed wanting to be seen as informed and experienced gamers. In summary, the following analysis shows that participants

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN DIGITAL GAMES

constructed typical images of women characters in games as hypersexualised, extremely thin, disproportionately voluptuous and presented in a sexual manner. These images were therefore seen as pandering to the sexual fantasies of male gamers across questionnaire responses.

Male gamers and developers were in turn seen as malleable, naïve and impressed with these unrealistic bodies. In contrast, women gamers were presented as making an informed choice to play games where women were “kick ass”, strong and powerful. Women were frustrated by the prevalence of hypersexualised bodies, but talked of avoiding or ignoring these idealised images.

Games Are Made to Appeal to Men's Sexual Fantasies

Participants constructed the female characters in digital games as unacceptable in various ways. These constructions mirrored the ways in which previous research has shown that women tend to be portrayed as peripheral characters (Burgess *et al.*, 2007) and to be shown in unrealistic proportions (Dill & Thill, 2007; Martins *et al.*, 2009). The explanation suggested by the participants was that the images were for a specific audience; one that did not include the female gamers surveyed:

They tend to be stick thin with extremely large breasts, wearing revealing clothes and made to appeal to the average male gamer. (P8)

Here these images are constructed as being of unrealistic bodies, and disproportionately voluptuous, by using the term “stick thin” and making it clear that average breast sizes seen in games are “extremely” large while also arguing that the images are for a very specific audience i.e. the average *male* gamer.

Other participants used the intended audience to dismiss and delegitimise the images as being irrelevant to their own gaming:

Female characters are pretty commonly extremely busty with a slim waist and large lips - kind of like a Barbie doll, but for grown men! (P2)

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN DIGITAL GAMES

Very rarely do I see female characters that are modest, built for strength and not porn fantasies, and provided with weapons etc that are fun to play. (P3)

In these two extracts, again the confirmation of unrealistic bodies can be seen with the use of phrases like “[extremely] busty” (P2). In addition, the desires of the intended audience are constructed as immature and adolescent by referring to toys (“like a Barbie doll, but for grown men”, P2) and porn (“very rarely do I see female characters that are...not porn fantasies”, P3). Here the female gamers are able to rationalise the poor representation of female characters and also distance themselves from the “average group of gamers”. It is interesting that the women here considered teenaged boys as the typical gamer, given that there are now more adult female gamers than there are male gamers under 18 (ESA, 2015).

Being an Informed Gamer

The participants further distinguished themselves as a group by positioning themselves as informed gamers, who were not duped into wanting to emulate the sexualised images on display. Many women exercised control over their game worlds by avoiding games in which representation of women was hypersexualised:

I largely seek out games with female characters or protagonists anyway. Tomb Raider is my all time favourite IP and I have all the games, even though the reboot remains unplayed :(/ I tend to steer clear from FPS/Big Brawny Bro games for the reason that there are no female characters/ (P8)

In this extract, the participant constructs herself as informed in two ways. Firstly, she emphasises her control over the games that she consumes, to position herself as an active consumer. Secondly she mentions a specific game for which she has “all the games” (*Tomb Raider*), a specific game genre (FPS or First Person Shooter) and slang term (Big Brawny Bro) to show her gaming credentials. Some participants also stated that the representation of women in standard games was something which determined what they chose to play:

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN DIGITAL GAMES

I'm thinking about female characters in the games I play and they're badass! I just finished Child of Light which is a RPG with a female protagonist. If a game has scantily clad women or misogyny, I won't play it. (P43)

This participant again mentions a specific game (*Child of Light*) and game type (RPG or Role Playing Game) to establish her gaming knowledge and then goes on to equate how women are represented in games with “misogyny” and distance herself from these games. In this account, if women are scantily clad, the resultant objectification and focus on women's appearance is seen as problematic for their power in the game. This participant suggests that women who are objectified cannot be ‘bad-ass’ so she distances herself from games where women are sexualised in this way, towards games where she can feel powerful while she plays.

Another approach to constructing an informed gamer identity was for participants to state that they were unaffected by negative representations of female bodies in games by stating that they did not care or that they ignored the issue:

To be honest I'm indifferent to it, I've grown up playing games so maybe I'm used to it, but the appearance of women in games really doesn't bother me. (P13)

Here the participant both makes her gaming credentials clear (“I've grown up playing games”) and states that she is unaffected (“really doesn't bother me”).

Exerting Control Over the Gaming Environment

Just as women portrayed themselves as informed gamers, in which they were able to control their experiences, participants also emphasised the importance of control over the gaming environment in the games they did play. The importance of games which used customisable avatars was emphasised by many of the women surveyed:

You are given the option to dress and create your character the way you want it, naked or not, with big breasts or not. (P21)

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN DIGITAL GAMES

In this extract, the participant highlights the idea of choice and control (“the way you want it”) but introduces the idea that this might not necessarily mean that unrealistic bodies are therefore automatically eliminated. She may choose to make the avatars more realistic, but then again she may *choose* to play an unrealistically proportioned female character. These choices were explored by other participants who described specific decisions they had made about gaming avatars which referenced norms linked to gender and body proportions:

If a game has scantily clad women or misogyny, I won't play it. / One notable exception was Saints Row which is fairly sexist but I made my character a massive fat woman in a bikini and I adored shooting everyone then. (P43)

...you will probably find very specific cookie-cutter type females and of course females of none-real races with very oddly shaped bodies, but it doesn't offend me in any way.

I've played those ladies in game. I've also played Saints Row 4 as a female and made sure that boob slider was all the way to the top. (P20)

Note that although P43 made her character a “massive fat woman” she chose to place her in a bikini, mirroring the typical attire of mainstream female characters (Burgess *et al.*, 2007) but at the same time subverting societal norms about what types of bodies are “allowed” to wear bikinis as an act of rebellion. P20 maintains that misogyny and unrealistic bodies (“oddly shaped”) do not impact on her experience. This participant aims to prove this stating that she chose to make her avatar even more extreme, and potentially objectified, than the average avatars by her use of the avatar customisation measures such as the “boob slider”. This measure is present on games which allow detailed avatar customisation and allows the breasts of female characters to be changed in isolation to other body measurements, and this participant shows her disobedience, and willingness to play characters with unrealistic proportions, by placing it “all the way up” i.e. giving her character the largest breasts possible.

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN DIGITAL GAMES

Here women are asserting the importance of control, but are not then using this control to “fix” the problems with female characters in games. They are instead choosing to further cement their position as undaunted by the hypersexualised figures by troubling mainstream ideas of the thin ideal to enhance their experience.

Female Gamers Do Not Have Body Image Problems

Many women took positioning themselves as informed consumers of digital games further by suggesting that, although “other women” may have body dissatisfaction problems, *they* did not:

Sure I would like to have legs that long and skin that flawless but unless I plaster my face with make-up or get a body stretcher I'm not going too [sic]. It's something people who are not happy about their bodies worry about. (P28)

Not to say I wouldn't like to sometimes play a character that looks more like me ... but I learned to be content with my body in its own rights. I realize I'm in the minority, and this breaks my heart. (P3)

Body image, and how women look, is constructed here as something that various “others” are worried about; the majority (P3), and those who are not happy with their body (P28).

However, these women presented themselves as unworried by this, as evidenced by statements related to being “content” (P3). Participant 28 uses extreme case formulation here referring to not wanting to “get a body stretcher” to construct achieving the bodies in digital games as unrealistic and ridiculous. It is notable, though that P28 does this despite admissions that *of course* women want to have ‘long legs and flawless skin’, suggesting that she is not as ‘immune’ to the influence of these beauty standards than the rest of her statements suggest.

Some participants constructed female gamers *in general* as a group who were not concerned with their bodies:

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN DIGITAL GAMES

To be honest all the female gamers I've ever met really don't have issues with their bodies. (P43)

It doesn't affect me at all, and as far as I'm aware, none of my friends. I think people who game tend to be a bit more secure in themselves (as gaming is seen as a non-mainstream activity and can be held with derision), so maybe that helps? (P1)

Participants here construct female gamers as being different, potentially from both male gamers and from female non-gamers. Belonging to the group of female gamers is constructed as providing protection from negative effects of images in the media.

Discussion

This research aimed to explore women gamers' accounts of the way in which female characters' bodies are portrayed in digital games, and the impact of these images on them as players. In describing how women were portrayed in games, participants' accounts supported the results from content analyses describing women in digital games as hypersexualised and peripheral, with exceptionally thin frames and large breasts (e.g. Martins *et al.*, 2009).

Participants explained this trend by reference to a perceived target audience of men, who were constructed as immature or adolescent. In this way, women gamers dismissed current portrayals of women as irrelevant to them. Participants also used several strategies to construct themselves as informed, expert gamers who were not duped into aspiring to be like the figures seen in games. These strategies included demonstrating their gaming knowledge and credentials, and asserting that how women were portrayed in games did not affect them due to their expert knowledge of gaming.

One approach to interpreting these findings would be take these accounts as evidence of an immunity offered to women who game against the adverse effect of viewing idealised bodies. It is certainly important that we listen to women's accounts of their experiences and identity, but the story given to us by our participants may not be the only one that can be told.

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN DIGITAL GAMES

To take these accounts of 'girl gamer immunity' at face value is to remove these women from their social and cultural context and also ignore the weight of evidence suggesting that many of them *are* likely to be affected in some way by these images. Gill's (2007) work on female choice. Gill argues that discourses of choice, such as that seen by our participants when discussing their gaming habits, are constrained by neoliberal ideas of free choice and autonomy but can dominate female accounts of potentially problematic phenomena. We can afford our participants what Gill (2007, p. 78) terms 'critical respect' by interrogating the circumstances that may give rise to such discourses.

The environments women game in are often hostile, especially when playing online, but their ability to challenge these practices and still participate safely is limited. Many women choose not to participate and withdraw from these spaces (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). For example Sundén and Sveningsson (2012) found that women feel under pressure not to challenge problematic gendered elements of the game space and seek out female friendly 'safe' spaces in which to game. Women who have been forced out of hostile gaming spaces can draw on a discourse of agency to construct their withdrawal as an informed choice.

Another motivation for participants portraying themselves as informed and able to choose wisely may be to avoid being labelled as a 'fake geek girl' or 'fake gamer girl' (Welsh, 2013), an issue in the community where female gamers are forced to prove their gaming credentials to be accepted into a traditionally masculine community. Our participants constructed female gamers as a community of women who were savvy, realistic and different; not only from other gamers, but from other women. This construction may be in reaction to a dominant discourse used by men in some gaming communities that female gamers must be either "fat, ugly or slutty" (www.fatuglyorslutty.com).

The specific context of our research may also have given rise to accounts which portray female gamers in certain ways. Little research has so far been conducted on gaming

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN DIGITAL GAMES

identity in women, with some findings suggesting that women are reluctant to claim a 'gamer' identity (Shaw, 2012). The current research specifically recruited women who identified as 'gamers', and may therefore have drawn women who identified strongly with this label and would therefore be motivated to construct it positively.

Limitations

Advertising the study as for 'women gamers' may have limited the pool of participants, and may have encouraged participants to try to demonstrate their 'expert' status in their responses. It may also have led to recruitment of women who identify particularly strongly with the 'girl gamer' community. Also, we advertised using contacts who ran social networking sites devoted to women gamers, and via the first author's social networks, which may again have led to some bias in responses relative to those women who enjoy playing digital games but do not access such sites. Asking women gamers to give accounts of portrayal of women's bodies in computer games may have polarised recruitment in favour of those with particularly positive views of their bodies, or who were motivated to portray their relationship with their body positively. Further work could use different recruitment strategies to investigate this further.

Further Research

We did not ask women to indicate their sexuality or ethnicity, which could be addressed in more detail in future research. In Sundén & Sveningsson's (2012) research, gamers talked a lot about gender and sexuality in games and gaming spaces, but not about race, suggesting that issues related to race are not made explicit by the community (this does not mean they do not exist). There is some evidence that White women have more slender ideals than those in other ethnic groups and are also more dissatisfied with their bodies (Grabe & Hyde, 2006; Grogan, 2016), although differences seem to be dependent on degree of identification with particular sub-cultures (Cachelin *et al.*, 2006) and may be reducing due

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN DIGITAL GAMES

to access to international media (though see Roberts *et al.*, 2006 for a critique). Although there is some evidence that women who have sexual relationships with other women may have more flexible body ideals and may have higher body satisfaction than heterosexual women (Morrison *et al.*, 2004; Morrison & McCutcheon, 2012) they are still subject to the same pervasive beauty ideals so are likely to show similar patterns of body dissatisfaction to straight women.

More generally, further research could focus on the explanations and motivations for the persistence of hypersexualised female character designs, despite the rejection of this image by female gamers in our study. Game development is becoming increasingly accessible to independent software developers, which may result in a widening of participation to more women and people of colour, due to reduced reliance on large companies where racism and sexism may be structural. Investigation of why poor representation of female characters persists in mainstream games may offer opportunities to continue the positive changes identified by our participants.

Conclusions

It appears that the female gamers surveyed were motivated to appear both as credible gamers and as well-informed women when asked about the effects of hypersexualised and unrealistic female bodies in digital games. The participants suggested that control over their environment and their immunity to hypersexualised images in digital games set them apart as a group from other women. However, these accounts could be motivated by a general trend for female gamers to withdraw from mainstream game consumption and the gaming community as a result of misogynist gaming environments.

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PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S BODIES IN DIGITAL GAMES

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