



The U.S. Video Game Industry: Analyzing Representation of Gender and Race

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ABSTRACT

*Today's media are vast in both form and influence; however, few cultural studies scholars address the video gaming industry's role in domestic maintenance and global imposition of U.S. hegemonic ideologies. In this study, video games are analyzed by cover art, content, and origin of production. Whether it is earning more "powers" in games such as *Star Wars*, or earning points to purchase more powerful artillery in *Grand Theft Auto*, capitalist ideology is reinforced in a subtle, entertaining fashion. This study shows that oppressive hegemonic representations of gender and race are not only present, but permeate the majority of top-selling video games. Finally, the study traces the origins of best-selling games, to reveal a virtual U.S. monopoly in the content of this formative medium.*

Keywords: critical theory; capitalism; hegemony; globalism; video games; gender issues; race; social impact of technology

INTRODUCTION

Recently, the Chinese government banned 50 U.S. video games, top sellers worldwide, claiming that they are a negative influence on Chinese youth. This was seen by many as an attempt to maintain hegemonic codes in China (China Daily News Online, Sept. 28, 2005). However, throughout discussions of the role of media in establishing and perpetuating hegemonic codes in society, (Cortes, 2000; Fiske, 1992, 1994.; Gross, 2001; Hall, 2000; Hooks, 1990), few scholars address the video gaming industry's role in domestic maintenance and global imposition of U.S. hegemonic ideologies.

By and large, the most popular video games in the U.S. are also the best-selling games

worldwide (Appendix B). The U.S. monopoly on the gaming software industry, as it applies to sociological effects on children, is paramount. This discussion is not to claim that all video games are bad. In contrast, games, such as *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, invite players to question ethical issues such as responsibility for one's actions. *Freedom Fighters* inverts the ideologies surrounding the U.S.-Iraq war, allowing players to question the difference between a terrorist and a freedom fighter. It points to the possibility that the labels lie only in what one believes is right and just. In *Tak and the Power of Ju Ju*, young players enjoy the role of an unlikely hero, a small, awkward tribesman who rescues the Pupununu people from the evil sorcerer, Tlalock. This game il-

illustrates that heroism can be found in the most unlikely persons. This said, in the majority of these best-sellers, ideologies of capitalism, white male-dominance, and violence is blatant. Gamers gain prestige by earning points, which enable them to “buy” better equipment in the game. For example, in *ATV OffRoad Fury*, ATV riders can “purchase” better engines, better riders, and better equipment each time they win a race. This purchasing of gadgets is of unquestioned value, thus, capitalist ideologies are imbedded deep within the premise of the game. In this way, production or performance is constant and only consumption can be varied. Whether it is earning more “powers” in games such as *The Elder Scrolls II: Morrowind*, or earning points to purchase artillery in *Grand Theft Auto*, capitalist ideology is reinforced in subtle, engaging fashion. This study shows that the U.S. hegemonic codes of capitalism, gender, and race are not only present, but prevalent in the majority of video games. In addition, it indicates that the reason behind the monopoly of video game ideology is due to the U.S.’s domination of the gaming software industry production and sales.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the same way that under-representation or negative stereotypical images have the ability to affect children’s attitudes, values, and roles of themselves and others in society, the implications of racial diversity and stereotypes in video games have yet to be researched. A fair examination of the quality of any message that children receive also requires a close look at how people of color are depicted in video games. These images influence perceptions of societal roles, not only for youth of color, but also for white youth—boys and girls alike. In order to present a clear picture of the message that youth of all colors are receiving in video games, a racial analysis must be part of video game analysis.

Post-structuralist Jaques Lacan theorizes that in the pre-Oedipal stage, before babies develop language, they inhabit an imaginary speechless world between mother, child, and

world. The acquisition of language results in the loss of the imaginary world identity with the mother, and thus, the child enters a (masculine) world that is structured by language (Crotty, 1998). Applying Lacanian symbolic theory, the individual forms identity of self and identity of others through the images one views. As the individual views images that resemble or do not resemble the self, she or he develops a perception of one’s position in society (Crotty, 1998). Assuming this is true, the presence of symbolic annihilation in the video gaming industry for females and minorities is alarming. It is logical to apply Gross’s (2001) ideas of symbolic annihilation to the video gaming industry where those who are at the bottom of the various power hierarchies will be kept in their places in part through relative invisibility (p.409). By focusing on the negligible representation of women and minorities, the following analysis of current popular video game selections suggests that representational issues may be at the core of the influence of gender and ethnicity on the adoption and use of gaming technology. Furthermore, it suggests that the global hegemonic effects of the U.S. monopoly of the gaming industry are an area for further research.

This article is intended to expand the work of cultural theorists Stuart Hall (2000), Bell Hooks (1991), Larry Gross (2001), and Herman Gray (2001), who critically question the connection between popular culture and the representation of social groups. Although video game sales are a multi-billion dollar global industry, cultural scholars are markedly mute about the effects of video games. Leonard (2004) claims, “There is a marked failure to recognize video games as sophisticated vehicles inhabiting and disseminating ideologies of hegemony,” (p. 3). Video games are part of a capitalist economy—but at what cost to the social development of youth? What about ethics? In this discussion, a sample of twenty top-selling video games is analyzed to determine messages about capitalism, race, and gender. While quantification of female and minority characters in a large sample of video games

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