## Chapter LIII
# Gender and Racial Stereotypes in Popular Video Games

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## ABSTRACT

*While the violent content of video games has caused wide concern among scholars, gender, and racial stereotypes in video games are still an understudied area. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a better understanding of the stereotypical phenomenon in video games. The book chapter first provides a comprehensive review of previous studies conducted upon gender-role and racial portrayals in video games. Then a small-scale content analysis on a sample of official trailers, introductory sequences and covers of 19 of the most popular video games is introduced. Finally, the implications of stereotype in video games and the possible social and psychological impacts on players, especially adolescent players, are discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

Video games have been one of the most popular entertainment media in the U.S. According to the Entertainment Software Association (2007), U.S. computer and video games software sales grew 6% to $7.4 billion in 2006. The prevalent usage of video games among adolescents causes growing concern (Child Development Institute, 2007; Gentile & Gentile, 2005). A recent NPD Group (2006) study reveals that 92% of children aged 2-17 play video games, and almost half of all "heavy gamers" are 6-to-17-years-old. Scholars have expressed broad concern about the possible impact of game playing on players, especially adolescent players, due to the inappropriate content

(such as the scenes of violence, a mass of blood and gores, etc.) in video games (Smith, Lachlan, & Tamborini, 2003). A large number of studies have been conducted upon the impact of the violent content on aggressive attitudes and behaviors (Anderson, 2004; Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Arriaga, Esteves, Cameiro, & Monteiro, 2006; Bartholomew, Sestir, & Davis, 2005; Gentile & Stone, 2005; Sherry, 2001). However, very limited research has examined the stereotypical content in video games and its possible impact on players. In this book chapter, we focus on the stereotypical content in video games. Specifically, we focus on gender and racial stereotypical content in video games. We first summarize previous research on the content of gender-role and racial portrayals in video games. Then we introduce a small-scale study on a sample of 19 of the most popular video games. Finally we discuss the implications of stereotyping in video games and the possible social and psychological impacts on players, especially adolescent players.

## STEREOTYPICAL PORTRAYALS IN VIDEO GAMES

### Stereotype

A stereotype is a mental "shorthand which helps to convey ideas and images quickly and clearly" (Courtney & Whipple, 1983, p. 205). It refers to one group's generalized and widely accepted perception about the personal attributes of members of another group (Ashmore & Boca, 1981; Dates & Barlow, 1990). Stereotypes serve multiple purposes in a variety of cognitive and motivational processes (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996). They emerge as a way of simplifying the demands on the perceiver (Bodenhausen, Kramer, & Susser, 1994; Bodenhausen, Sheppard, & Kramer, 1994; Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994); or as a way in response to environmental factors, such as different social roles (Eagly, 1995), group conflicts

(Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995), and difference in power (Fiske, 1993); or as a means of justifying the status quo (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Sidanius, 1993), or in response to a need for social identity (Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

In traditional media, gender and racial stereotypes are the most pervasive two. In mass media, compared to female characters, male characters appear more frequently, talk significantly more, and engage in noted behaviors more, such as achieving and showing leadership (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). In addition, these media provide distorted representation of women and minorities (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Greenberg & Baptista-Fernandez, 1980; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). Exposure to these distorted images can have a negative effect on users' perception of women and minorities (Omi, 1989). For instance, women are usually perceived as subordinate and passive-dependent to men, with sexual relationships as central in life (Cantor, 1987). Racial stereotypes widely exist in mass media as well. For instance, Black men are more likely to be portrayed as criminals (Entman, 1992; Peffley, Shields, & Williams, 1996); Asian men are usually portrayed as culturally ignorant; while Asian women are portrayed as submissive (Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin, 2006).

### Gender Stereotypes in Video Games

Dietz's (1998) study was one of the earliest studies to examine stereotypical portrayals in video games. The content analyzed both the portrayal of women and violence in a sample of 33 most popular Nintendo and Sega Genesis video games. In order to evaluate the role of women, she generalized four possible female stereotypes based on appearances and behaviors: females as sex objects or prizes, females as victims, females in feminine roles, and females as heroes or action characters. Not surprisingly, Dietz (1998) found that 41% of the games were devoid of female characters. Only 15% (5 out of 33) portrayed women

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