A Scientific Question: Sexism in Videogames

Since I was about 6 years old, I’ve enjoyed playing videogames. The idea of interacting with a virtual world has always fascinated me, and the feeling of progressing a story with interesting characters is unique and powerful. While games are a fun distraction from reality, they tend to have stereotypical portrayals of several groups; the most prominent of which being women. Early videogames like Super Mario Bros and Legend of Zelda depict women as damsels in distress that the male hero needs to rescue. Videogames have come a long way since then, featuring women in the roles of protagonist, antagonist, and much more. While videogames have certainly become more progressive in their portrayal of women, sexism is still prominent in the industry. Modern female game characters are often objectified, tending to have exaggerated and unrealistic features. This leads me to ask: does the consistently sexist portrayal of women in videogames have a negative effect on players?

An article in a scientific journal titled “Effects of exposure to sex-stereotyped video game characters on tolerance of sexual harassment” by Karen E. Dill, Brian P. Brown, and Michael A. Collins addresses the effects that sexist portrayals of women in videogames have on players. In the study, subjects were given short-term or long-term exposure to sex-coded videogame characters and video game violence. The study indicated that “men exposed to stereotypical content made judgments that were more tolerant of a real-life instance of sexual harassment compared to controls. Long-term exposure to video game violence was correlated with greater tolerance of sexual harassment and greater rape myth acceptance” (Dill, Brown and Collins, 2008). These results indicate that viewing sexist, stereotypical portrayals of women in video games makes viewers more tolerant of sexual harassment in real life. This implies that the consistently sexist portrayal of women in videogames does have a negative effect on players.

The evidence collected from the study seems to answer my initial question. I suspected that the stereotypical portrayal of women in videogames would have a negative effect on players, and that is the case. Other data from this study has piqued my interest. Long-term exposure to violence in videogames resulted not only in greater tolerance of sexual harassment, but greater rape myth acceptance. This leads me to believe that sexism and violence in videogames can have a negative effect on players’ worldviews. However, it’s unclear if playing violent, sexist videogames can change the way players interact with women in their day-to-day lives. Because some players become more accepting of sexual harassment and rape myths after long-term exposure, they may also treat women in a more demeaning way. Knowing if playing these games causes men to treat women in a more sexist way is important, as that could create a more sexist culture. My revised question is: does playing sexist, violent videogames cause players to treat women differently in their everyday lives?
Works Cited