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# An Analysis of Female Roles in Popular Sports Video Games

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Brennan W. Galloway entitled "An Analysis of Female Roles in Popular Sports Video Games." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Sport Studies.

Joy DeSensi, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Robin Hardin, Michelle Violanti

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Michelle Violanti

Accepted for the council:

Linda Painter  
Interim Dean of the  
Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records)

AN ANALYSIS OF FEMALE ROLES IN POPULAR SPORTS VIDEO GAMES

A thesis

Presented for the

Master of Science Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Brennan W Galloway

December 2006

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the roles and portrayal of female characters in popular sports video games. The 15 best-selling sports games of 2005 were played by the researcher without a time-limit or specified path within the game. Gameplay was videotaped and analyzed using a qualitative, descriptive participant-observation model (Glesne, 2006). This method is unique to video game analysis, as previous studies have used quantitative methods. Gameplay was typically about three hours for each game, and copious notes were taken during gameplay. Roles were then analyzed using a framework from previous work in both sports media and video game studies. Major themes found in the games were 1) an overall lack of female characters which was 2) based in the tension video games media creates between fantasy and simulation. Games on both sides of this fantasy/simulation spectrum had greatly varying portrayals of female characters. New technology such as the emerging ability to put users in the game as characters is important to the rapid evolution of video games. Increasing graphical and processing power of next-generation game consoles gives developers the ability to allow more user-created content rather than rely on generating pre-defined characters and roles, regardless of gender.

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

Video games are quickly approaching other forms of media in terms of exposure. Children are spending as much time playing video games as they are watching television. According to recent industry reports, 87% of children between the ages of 8 and 17 play video games at home (Walsh, et al., 2005). Sports are a popular subject of video games, with six of the top ten best selling games being sports games in 2005. *Madden NFL 06* sold almost three million units alone (Dunham, 2006). Sports are now just as prevalent in the video game world as they are on television and in movies, but research has not kept up with this change in technology (Scharrer, 2004). This exposure to video games (as opposed to traditional forms of sports media) has important implications for players due to the interactive nature of the medium.

Sports video games are also an important item for investigation because research is not readily available on the topic. The gendered content of sports media has been extensively studied in many contexts (Knight & Giuliano, 2003), however, video games have not been included in these studies. Due to the rise in popularity of video games and the potential for this form of media to be as influential in socialization as other forms of media (Leonard, 2003), this study investigates if the themes that are found in sports media in general are also found in sports video games.

Much research has been conducted on the gendered content of sports media. Sports media content in many mediums has been widely researched in both media studies and sports studies (Hallmark & Armstrong, 1999; Higgs & Weiller, 1994; Kane & Buysee, 2005; Tuggle, 1997; Wearden & Creedon, 2002;); however, the content of video

games has been less extensively studied. There have been studies on violence in video games and limited studies on gender in video games (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Dietz, 1998; Gailey, 1993; Haninger & Thompson, 2004; Scharrer, 2004), and most of the gendered research has focused on popular video game characters (such as Buffy and Laura Croft) (Labre & Duke, 2004; Mikula, 2003). One exception to this is Downs and Smith's 2005 study on hypersexuality in video games which investigated both male and female portrayals, but did not include roles. Studies on gender representation in sports games have been notably absent. This study intends to treat sports video games as a form of interactive media. While other studies have examined the gendered content of other forms of sports media and of video game content using quantitative content analysis methods, this study takes advantage of qualitative methods to describe and analyze how females are represented in video games.

Sports video games are also important because they allow for a disconnection between sport and the physical ability that sport usually requires (Graham, 1999; Haraway, 1991; Sørensen, 2003). This concept is based on work in cyborg theory and will be used as one of the theoretical frameworks for this study. Sports media such as television, movies, and video games requires minimal physical activity in order to consume. Unlike television, movies, and real-world sports, however, the "participants" (on-screen characters) of sports video games are completely virtual. While many traditional forms of sport rely on the physical capabilities of the participants, video games do not. This is important because of the historical connection between sport and the body and therefore the limitations that different body types present. This connection has been

used to discourage and sometimes eliminate women and girls from sport, especially “physical” sports (Whitson, 1994).

One of the reasons that sport has been traditionally seen as a “male realm” is the biological differences between males and females. Feminist critics of sport contend that sport is based on characteristics that favor males (aggression, speed, strength) and not females (flexibility, grace), and it is widely held that contemporary popular sports are constructed upon those attributes (Messner, 2002). Video games have the ability to circumvent these gendered advantages. Virtual athletes can literally do anything, remaining unimpeded by physical and socially-constructed gendered “realities.” While critics of this approach might argue that this technique would detract from the reality of the game, many games ignore reality in critical abilities of characters and features of the game anyway.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

Sports video games are a genre of sports media that have not been explored as a topic of scholarly work. These games are becoming a large part of both children’s and adults’ lives, and they certainly contribute to the socialization and attitudes of users (Deitz, 1998; Riva, Davide, & Ijsselsteijn, 2002; Tamborini et al., 2004 ). Sports games fall into a larger category of video games, which also have received limited attention from researchers. Few studies that have looked at video games have analyzed gendered content. Of particular importance to the present study is the ability of virtual games to disconnect sport from physicality, which holds the possibility of breaking down different levels of ability in sport.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study is to analyze the gendered content of popular video games. The guiding questions of this research are: 1) how are females represented in current popular video games and 2) how does this representation compare to other forms of sports media?

### *Significance of the Study*

This study adds to the existing body of work in both sports media and video game analysis. It evaluates themes that have been extensively studied and established in sports media research in a new, popular form of media that has been previously ignored by researchers in the field. The study also adds to the limited research on gender in video games. While I only look at a specific sub-set of video games as a whole, the study begins to fill gaps in video game research as suggested by Beasley and Standley (2002). By using recent games, the study also helps update research on the rapidly-evolving content of video games. The qualitative methodology of this study also is unique to the field of video games. Previous studies have ignored the increasingly interactive nature of video games and relied on quantitative methods used for traditional mass-media formats (Deitz, 1998; Riva, Davide, & Ijsselsteijn, 2002; Tamborini et al., 2004). Instead, this study utilizes qualitative methods to gain a deeper perspective than previous quantitative studies have. Overall, the study sheds light on new content for both sports media and video game research.

### *Limitations/Delimitations*

Any qualitative study will have certain limitations associated with the methodology, and this study is no exception. The in-depth analysis will come at the expense of greater numbers and a random sample, which will not allow the generalization of a strictly quantitative study. The purpose of the study is to find themes of female portrayal in this sample of the most popular games, and therefore only the top 15 games will be used.

Another potential limitation to this study is the use of a best-selling list to determine the most popular video games. While the bulk of video games are bought, the video game rental industry has slowly been gaining ground and is estimated to be a \$700 million market, with each rental costing about \$6 (Potkewitz, 2006). The important differences between game rental and ownership: much lower cost for rentals, opportunity to try games for limited time before moving on to another, and the aspect of buying games to establish a collection mean that there could be significant differences between game buyers and renters. The largest rental operation, Blockbuster (Potkewitz, 2006), has limited statistics available (only a monthly top 10 list for each game system), but the rental numbers that are available suggest that renters prefer similar titles to buyers. According to the Game Rush website (Blockbuster's video game extension), three of the top ten most-rented titles for November 2006 were sports games. *Madden NFL 07*, *Need For Speed: Carbon*, and *NCAA Football 2007* all appear on the top 10 list (Game Rush, 2006). These games are all updates of titles found on the 2005 best selling list.

While there are hundreds of sports video games available for a wide range of game consoles, the games in this study have reached millions of homes and have reached an incredibly wide range of users. The best selling game, *Madden NFL 06* sold nearly three million units in 2005 alone, giving it significant influence among video games and media as a whole. Many of these games are available worldwide, and will likely be played for years to come.

### *Definition of Terms*

Consoles are pieces of hardware designed to play video games. For this study, the current-generation PlayStation 2 console made by Sony is used.

Cut scenes are non-playable parts of the game which can feature either live-action video or computer generated characters who act out scripted portions of the game.

Gender is the (often cultural) representation of sex. This study specifically looks at this representation rather than focusing on the technical aspects of presenting a male or female in a game.

Heterosexualization is the portrayal of females specifically designed to be “attractive” to men. This typically includes large breasts, a thin waist, tight and revealing clothes, and suggestive body language.

Sex is defined as the physical characteristics of an individual, regardless of their representation.

Sport games are defined as games in which the characters engage in a competitive activity governed by rules, customs, and/or governing organizations (American Heritage, 2000). This definition includes both team sports and individual sports.

*Study Outline*

Following this introductory chapter, chapter II reviews existing literature on both sports media and video games to establish themes found in both fields. These themes are used to not only to analyze the content of the games, but also to create a context for the study within existing video game research and sports media research. Chapter III outlines how games will be selected, played, and analyzed. The results of the study are contained in chapter IV, and chapter V follows with an analysis of those results. Chapter VI provides conclusions and future recommendations based on this study.

## Chapter II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to investigate the gendered content of sports video games, specifically the representation of women in popular sports games. Because no published studies are available on the content of sports video games, I will use existing research in both sports media and video game media to define themes which can guide the analysis of the video games in this study. Basing the study on sports media themes allows for a broader base than simply looking at video game research, which is much less developed as a field and lacks any theoretical foundation. The theoretical framework of the study is based on broad research in feminist and feminist cyborg research.

#### *Theoretical Framework*

There is extensive research in sports media based on feminist theory. This study follows that trend of research, and goes beyond the current scope of feminist sports media research into the realm of video games. Various features of video games such as completely virtual characters make them much different than traditional sports media, making it relevant to look at feminist cyborg theory, which has a strong basis in technological innovation and progress.

Despite the historical imbalance between male and female participation, there is overwhelming evidence that female participation numbers on all levels of sport have increased since Title IX's passage in 1972 (Costa, 2002). This participation has been reflected by an increase in media exposure for female athletes. The benefits of playing sport both as a youth and throughout life have been well documented (De Souza et.

al., 1994; Freedson, 1994; and Gill, 1994 for overviews on benefits for women), and these increases in women's sport participation are important steps in the process of leveling the playing field not only in sports, but in other arenas as well. Women enjoy the physicality of traditional men's sports when they have the opportunity (Thebridge, 1999). There is also an increase in co-ed sport participation. Recreation leagues for all ages have been increasing, and studies have documented some positive effects from these leagues (Snyder & Ammons, 1993).

While there is little scholarly debate over the value of sport for women and progress that women have made in sport, some feminist scholars have debated the effect and consequences of this increase in exposure, however. A division has emerged between radical feminists and postmodern feminists regarding the values of femininity and blatant heterosexuality. It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss the merits and pitfalls of each, but the study does follow the more general framework that the experience and portrayals of women in media are important. It also uses common features of both types of feminist thought as a theoretical background to form the research question (as described above), methodology, and analysis.

This study uses the feminist approach that quantitative studies do not yield as rich analysis as qualitative inquiry can. Carty (2005) and others have documented and analyzed how mere numbers may not be the best way to portray the status of women in athletics. In her work on sports advertising, Carty makes the point that "I selected unique cases that are especially informative to gain a deeper understanding of a certain theme. Exploratory research like this is beneficial because we can form some tentative

propositions that in future research may be formalized and analyzed more rigorously” (135). Other authors support this concept that depth can provide as much and often more value as breadth, especially when looking at features that often have no quantifiable definition. This study takes the qualitative principles espoused very deeply in feminist research and applies them to the field of video games. While previous research on video games has typically been based on a qualitative model, researchers have noted that a qualitative approach would be appropriate and valuable.

Haraway's (1991) "Cyborg Manifesto" explains the use of cyborg theory when looking at the potential for current-generation video games to break down gender barriers. Haraway explains "That is why cyborg politics insist on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine. These are the couplings which make Man and Woman so problematic, subverting the structure of desire, the force imagined to generate language and gender, and so subverting the structure and modes of reproduction of 'Western' identity, of nature and culture, of mirror and eye, slave and master, body and mind" (176). Cyborg theory's application to current video games, therefore, relies on the games' ability to both deconstruct (by divorcing physical movement with sport) and combine (by allowing male players to take an in-game female representation) physical representation in sport. These seemingly contradictory roles are the "noise" and "pollution" that Haraway advocates.

### *Gender in Sports Media*

Overall, much of the work on sports in the media has concentrated on television, radio, print media, and, movies. As video games have increased their share of the media

market, scholarly research has struggled to keep up with the significance of this new form of media. Relatively few studies have been conducted on the topic of video games and most have focused on violence. Sports fields have virtually ignored video games as a serious research topic, and studies which have looked at sports games have come from more general fields such as cultural studies. Gender differences have been studied briefly in video games (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Scharrer, 2004), but no study has looked specifically at sports video games.

There are three main themes that have developed in the gendered content of sport media. The first theme, developed primarily by Messner (2002), is the symbolic annihilation of females in sports media. This concept is that by not covering women in girls in mainstream and other media, most people are oblivious to women's existence in sport. The second theme is the trivialization of women's sports and women in sport. Three of the main components of trivialization are less production value for coverage of women's events, gender marking, and differences in commentator language. A third important theme in media coverage of sport is the ultra-feminization of women in sport. Not only do women have to present a hetero-sexy image to receive media coverage, but often participants in sports are overshadowed by cheerleaders on the sidelines or models in bathing suits.

#### *Symbolic Annihilation in Sports Media*

Symbolic annihilation is the most important and prevalent theme in sports media analyses. Many studies have shown that women do not receive nearly as much coverage in sports media as men. Studies have looked at television highlight shows (Messner,

Duncan & Cooky, 2003; Tuggle, 1997;); newspaper (Capranica et al., 2005), television (Billings, Angelini & Eastman, 2005; Duncan, Messner, Williams & Jensen, 1990; Hallmark & Armstrong, 1999; Higgs & Weiller, 1994), and magazine coverage (Lumpkin & Williams, 1991); and other forms of media as well (Wearden & Creedon, 2002). While some studies such as Higgs, Weiller, and Martin's (2003) and Capranica and Aversa's (2002) analysis of Olympic coverage show that coverage rates for women's sports are improving, others have found that women are represented at the same rate that they were 30 years ago (Messner et al., 2003). Carty (2005) found that advertising in both print and television and television coverage of female athletes still focuses on the sexual nature of the women rather than their dual role as an athlete and a woman.

The problem with this low amount of media coverage for women's sports is that media exposure legitimizes sport. According to Messner (2002) and others, when events are not covered in the media, they do not exist to the casual television viewer. The "symbolic annihilation" of women in sport due to the lack of media coverage has vast implications for not only women's professional sport, but also for girls and women who aspire to participate. While the Internet and proliferation of cable television channels have somewhat expanded the coverage for all sports (Capranica, et al., 2005), there remains a hierarchy of coverage which favors men's sport. Expanded media outlets provide some exposure for all sports, but people still have to seek out coverage of minor sports and events rather than being bombarded with coverage of major events (Duncan et al., 1990). This means that female viewers have less exposure to potential role models in sport, making it less likely that they would participate.

The symbolic annihilation of women's sports leads to a problem for opportunities for women and girls to play sports at all levels. The cycle begins with the media never fully realizing the potential for women's sports as prime events worth covering. They will not do so, however, unless there are sponsors willing to pay for airtime during these events. The sponsors must believe that there is an audience for the event before they will be willing to pay for airtime, but the audience is still left with the opinion that male sports are more interesting and have no way of changing that opinion until there is more media coverage.

This all works together to continue the lack of exposure for women's sport, and therefore the opportunity for professional sport is curtailed greatly (Messner, 2002). Media contracts are integral for professional sports to thrive, as media creates an audience not only for televised games but also for selling tickets. If consumers are not aware that the events are happening, they are not going to buy tickets to them. The opposite has been seen, in fact, with the extensive coverage of the 1999 Women's World Cup creating a dramatic rise in participation and interest in women's soccer (Costa, 2002) and the rise in participation and interest in women's basketball in Connecticut after the University of Connecticut national championship in 1995 (Costa, 2002).

Overall, the lack of coverage for women's sports in the media perpetuates the idea that sports are a male realm. Because sport has been seen as a place for males and not females (Bryson, 1987; Messner, 2002), the coverage of women's sports in the media has done nothing to challenge this stereotype. For women's sport to progress, girls and women must be exposed to what other females are doing in sport. Without this exposure,

both males and females will continue to think that women are only involved in the “major” women’s sports such as tennis and ice skating, which are covered by the mainstream media. If sports media covered sports on a more equal basis, women’s sport could achieve the cultural status that male sport has held for decades.

### *Trivialization in Sports Media*

While coverage for women’s sports is limited, there have been some increases in exposure for women athletes (Capranica, et al., 2005). One of the main problems, however, with this coverage is that many times the coverage does not equal the coverage that men’s events receive. The three main issues with coverage of women’s sports are that they have less production value, they are often specifically marked as “women’s” events, and that coverage almost always focuses on “hetero-sexy” images of women athletes. These three aspects of media coverage continue to perpetuate the problems of the lack of exposure noted above.

When women’s events are covered, they do not receive as much hype or production value in their coverage (Hallmark & Armstrong, 1999). Men’s championship events are publicized for weeks and months before the event, while women’s championship events are sometimes not marketed at all. While some might argue that the women’s events are receiving the same coverage as other minor men’s events receive, this alone is a problem. The hype that surrounds major events legitimizes and enhances the event, and therefore the sport. Without promotion of women’s sports, the reverse is true. Lack of promotion makes events less exciting to the viewer, and devalues the sport in the viewer’s eyes. If the announcers and networks are unexcited to broadcast the event,

viewers will also lack the enthusiasm currently reserved for men's sports. While Hallmark and Armstrong's (1999) results were somewhat mixed, they did find that men's events do have more overall production value than most women's events. Their results confirm what others have found when looking at the difference between coverage of men's and women's sporting events. Billings, Angelini and Eastman's 2005 study of golf coverage indicates that announcers may be moving toward more equal coverage of males and females in golf, but a more widespread trend has not been found.

A second way that women's events are trivialized by coverage is the gender marking of women's sports. Both media and sports organizations refer to women's sports as "women's basketball" or "women's soccer" while the men's equivalent is simply "basketball" or "soccer". This again suggests that men are playing the real version of the sport while women are playing a lesser alternative (Higgs & Weiller, 1994). Eitzen and Zinn's 1989 study and Ward's (2004) follow-up both show that across the board, schools often use sexist and gender-marked mascots for their women's teams. College athletic departments perpetuate the difference by referring to women's teams as "lady" or "women" while their men's teams play under the un-marked mascot. They theorize that these mascots limit recognition and validation for the female athletes at the school.

Finally, commentating differences towards men and women athletes add to the trivialization for women's sports. It has been well documented that commentators refer to women athletes far differently than their male counterparts. Women athletes are often referred to as girls, and given less positive descriptions (announcers will dwell on mistakes by the loser rather than successful actions taken by the victor) while men

receive more respect (using last names) and exciting descriptors. Women are also portrayed as both athletes and women, not as premiere athletes (Bryson, 1987; Duncan, et.al., 1990; Messner, 2002). Commentators often talk about female athletes' husbands, boyfriends, and other activities while talk about male athletes' athletic achievements (Tuggle, 1997). The difference goes beyond description though, as female athletes are expected to not only be skilled athletes but also sex symbols.

#### *Heterosexualization of Women in Sport*

Female athletes are faces with a troubling dual image that they must maintain to keep a "positive" image and be portrayed by the media. In addition to being good at their sport, female athletes also have to be attractive and more specifically be heterosexually attractive. This dual role can be seen in media guides, advertising, promotion of events, overall media coverage, among other places. This sexualization of women in sport again trivializes athletic skill and makes players look like they are only valuable for their beauty, not their skill (Bryson, 1987; Duncan et al., 1990; Wearden & Creedon, 2002; Wensing & Bruce, 2003).

It is important to note that this beauty falls under the traditional "heterosexy" category, and therefore would be appealing to men. This makes women only valued if they fit into a very specific mold that appeals to mainstream society. Any deviation from this mold is not valued and will be ignored by the media (Knight & Giuliano, 2003). Overall, the emphasis on traditionally feminine characteristics is based on the congruence the gendered characteristics and sex of the character. Rarely are female characters portrayed with stereotypically masculine characteristics (Messner, 2002).

*Gender in Video Game Media*

It is hard to tell from existing studies whether sports video games contain the specific themes that are seen in traditional sports media. Studies have shown that video game media of all types do portray women with the same general themes. Studies of video games have shown that there are few women characters in current games, that female characters in video games are often disrespected and do not receive primary roles, and that when females are represented they fit into the ultra-feminine framework that plagues athletes (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Scharrer, 2004).

*Symbolic Annihilation in Video Games*

Existing research in the area shows that video game media, like sports media, lacks female representation. Scharrer (2004) found that male characters vastly outnumber female characters in her study of video game advertisements (probably replicating game content). Similarly, Deitz (1998) found that 41% of the video games in her convenience sample of Nintendo and Sega Genesis games completely lacked female characters. Finally, Beasley and Standley's 2002 study shows that games on the subsequent generation of consoles (PlayStation and Nintendo 64) provide no more female characters than the previous generation. Out of all the characters in their study, only 13% were female. All of these studies found few female characters in the games that they studied, and even fewer of these characters were playable.

It is impossible to say whether this lack of representation can be found in sports video games specifically. If sports games do follow this trend, which is likely (the trend is found in both sports media and video game media), the message that game producers

are sending is problematic. Following work in cyborg theory, video games are a format which is unique in that the media content is completely virtual, where biological differences are non-existent (Graham, 1999; Haraway, 1991; Sørensen, 2003). In a virtual world, representation can theoretically be equal among the sexes, and therefore serve as a site for cultural change.

### *Trivialization in Video Games*

The studies mentioned above not only present the lack of females but also found themes similar to the representation of females in sports media. Most of the female characters in the games studied were non-playable (Beasley & Standley 2002; Deitz, 1998; Gailey, 1993; Scharrer, 2004). All of the content analysis studies which are available have found limited playable female characters. This turns a potential subject of a game (a playable character) into an object (something to be manipulated, saved, or viewed). While none of the themes that are found in sports media have been investigated in studies of video games, the low importance of female characters in games suggests the same trivialization of women that the themes in sport media do. One of the most important studies looking at the objectification was the article looking at video game characters in various games by Beasley and Standley (2002) where they found that female characters wore less clothing than male characters, and were typically labeled as big-breasted by the authors. This sexualized representation will be further explored in the next section.

*Heterosexualization of Females in Video Games*

The third theme which is found in sports media, heterosexualization of women, is certainly found in video game media as well. Beasley and Standley's 2002 article mentioned above, Dietz (1998), Sharrer (2004), and even Gailey's 1993 study, which looked at games limited by the graphics technology of the time, all found themes of sexual objectification of female characters in video games. Deitz (1998) notes "Females, if they exist, are usually off-stage princesses and their handmaidens, who are rewards or goals for successfully the particular adventure or level" (p. 86). Video games are here used to distort reality into what the primary consumers for video games (young men) might want. (Scharrer, 2004)

*Summary*

Because of the lack of video game studies, it is difficult to make generalizations about the parallels between video game and sports media. More work certainly needs to be done in the field of video games to get a foundation for what themes and frames video games include. One of the primary difficulties with studying video game media is the ever-changing landscape that technology enables. Every week new games are released for every console, and hardware for the games often changes as rapidly. While constant change is a staple of any media environment, video game technology certainly changes faster than the world of sport (Beasley & Standley, 2002). Of the studies available, it is appropriate to say that similar themes have been found in studies of video games and sports media. With the expansion of both sports studies and video game studies, perhaps a more concrete comparison can be made in the future.

## Chapter III

### METHODOLOGY

While content analysis studies of video games remain sparse, the literature that does exist relies on traditional methods of content analysis. This study will look at representation of women in sports video games, and while it will use some features of content analysis research, it will also draw heavily on participant-observation qualitative methods for analysis. Because games have become increasingly interactive and user-defined (Riva, Davide, & Ijsselsteijn, 2002), methods that have been previously used for mass media are now inadequate to reflect the content of games. Video games, and especially sports games, are now completely user-centered, allowing users to determine the character, location, team, and other important aspects of the game. While previous generations of video games sent the player through pre-determined levels with programmed characters, current games are not linear and require interaction from the player to determine how the game progresses. These attributes of new games hinder traditional quantitative methods that treat the games as a “push” medium (determined by the producer) and favor more qualitative methods that allow more interaction and investigation into the content of the games (Riva, Davide, & Ijsselsteijn, 2002; Tamborini, 2004).

#### *Sampling Method*

Of primary importance to any content analysis study, is content selection. Previous studies have used random sampling of games (Beasley & Standley, 2002), convenience sampling (Haninger & Thompson, 2004), and purposive sampling (Dietz,

1998; Lachlan, Smith, & Tamborini, 2005). This study uses a purposive method of sampling which takes the top 15 sports games from the industry's 2005 best selling games list. All of the games are played on the Sony PlayStation 2 system which, according to industry reports, is the most popular video game system in the world (*PlayStation 2*, 2005). The games contain a mix of team and individual sports and a wide range of overall sports is selected. The use of a yearly list is important to ensure that games selected are popular for more than a specific season or timeframe (baseball games at the beginning of Major League Baseball season, for example). The wide timeframe also avoids the increased popularity of new games. The IGN.com yearly list includes rank and number of units sold. While the PlayStation 2 was overtaken by the Xbox 360 as the latest generation of video game technology in December 2005, the new Xbox 360 lacks consumer support and is currently alone as the only "next generation" console.

### *Procedure*

While previous work on video game content analysis has been based on quantitative methods used for traditional media (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Dietz, 1998; Haninger & Thompson, 2004; Lachlan, Smith, & Tamborini, 2005), the interactive nature of current games benefits greatly from a more in-depth approach. This study uses methods from participant-observation to get more depth than would be available through traditional coding techniques. Previous studies have used varying lengths of play, from only 10 minutes (Lachlan et. al 2005) to more than one hour (Haninger & Thompson, 2004). Because this study will use a more in-depth approach, a long period of play was necessary to evaluate the game. All of the games were played for between two and four

hours to investigate the various modes of gameplay and the play was recorded for re-analysis. The recording used a video camera system to transfer the on-screen image to a tape, which served as the document for later analysis. Because the 15 games were not present at all times for analysis after the original gameplay, the researcher notes and video were critical for drawing themes from the games.

All of the games were acquired through the Gamespy video game rental service. This service allows subscribers to set up a wish-list of games from an extremely broad selection of games for almost any current game system. Gamespy allows two games to be rented at once, and it sends the next game on your list as soon as it receives a returned game. The benefits of this service are that it provides a vast array of titles (local rental stores did not have all 15 of the games contained in this study), it allows unlimited time on each game, and unlimited games can be rented for the monthly fee with shipping included. The main drawback, however, is that the game warehouse is located in southern California. Sending games from the east coast via first-class US postal service packaging took at least three days each way. This resulted in a significant slow-down in productivity over the course of the study. Another minor problem with the service was their sending of the wrong games and games that were virtually un-playable due to disc errors. Overall, the Gamespy service was the only reasonable source for the 15 games included in this study due to cost of local, individual rental fees as well as local availability of game titles.

#### *Researcher as the Instrument*

An important aspect of any qualitative methodology is the researcher. I have played video games as a leisure activity for most of my life, and am generally skilled at

sports games. My background as a player gave me the ability to further explore the games than a novice player. Even though games are developed for hundreds of hours of gameplay, I believe that in the few hours that I played most of the games I accessed the important features of the games. Similar to a participant-observer, I took notes on the initial game experience, specifically looking for gender representation. I then used those notes to go back through all of the gameplay once all of the data collection had been completed and began to search for patterns in representation.

Using a qualitative methodology presents interesting implications for potential bias in both data collection and analysis. Having a background in both video games and feminist research, I believe that my interest in this project comes neither from an explicitly “activist” nor “protectionist” standpoint. The goal of the project, to explore portrayals of female characters in popular sports video games, comes with a specific purpose based in feminist research. As the instrument of research, I believe that while my experience in gaming gives me vast previous exposure to various types of video games, this exposure only helps my ability to explore the game. My experience in research gives me the ability to use this background as an advantage rather than as a potential reason for bias. Aware of the possibility for bias from both my gaming background (to “protect” the industry in some ways) and my background as a researcher (to take an “activist” stance against the games), I try throughout the study to present both sides equally.

### *Data Analysis*

The games were analyzed through a participant-observation qualitative model. While video games are certainly not as socially interactive as groups or cultures (settings

which participant-observation is commonly used), the increasingly interactive nature of video games requires a more in-depth analysis than traditional quantitative content analysis can provide. The two forms of documentation for this study are the primary data that are recorded from gameplay and researcher notes on themes, descriptions, and patterns in the games. Following a model suggested by Glesne (2006), a research notebook was kept containing all of the notes on the games, writing all relevant observations about the content of the games and was backed up by the game footage to develop a cohesive analysis of the data. Once all of the games were played, the notes and footage were broken down into smaller categories to be used for the thematic analysis of the games. This process began by looking at general themes found throughout the notes and narrowed into more specific data patterns. The notes and supporting gameplay footage were analyzed using these codes to form the final analysis.

### *Games*

The top 18 games that are used in the pre-test and study are shown in the table 1. Those with asterisks are duplicates, and therefore were used for the pre-test.

### *Pre-test*

To evaluate the proposed method for the study (because no similar studies could be found), a pre-test was conducted on the first three duplicate titles on the top selling games list. Because many games are slightly updated every year (mainly with roster changes), the content of the game remains very similar. To avoid analyzing games from the same series in this study, I used the duplicates (*Need for Speed Underground 2*, *Madden NFL 2005*, and *NBA Live 2005*) to ensure the planned methods would yield

**Table 1. Top 18 Sports Video Games in 2005**

Rank (Overall rank)	Game	Publisher	Units Sold
1. (1)	Madden NFL 06	Electronic Arts	2.95m
2. (2)	Gran Turismo 4	SCEA	1.5m
3. (3)	NCAA Football 06	Electronic Arts	1.13m
4. (5)	MVP Baseball 2005	Electronic Arts	970k
5. (7)	NBA Live 06	Electronic Arts	826k
6. (11)	Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition	Rockstar Games	733k
7. (13)	Need for Speed Most Wanted	Electronic Arts	677k
8. (16)	Tony Hawk's American Wasteland	Activision	629k
9. (18)	Major League Baseball 2K5	2K Games	547k
10. (19)	Burnout 3: Takedown	Electronic Arts	520k
11. (23)	Fight Night Round 2	Electronic Arts	443k
12. (24)	*Need for Speed Underground 2*	Electronic Arts	440k
13. (26)	Blitz: The League	Midway	420k
14. (27)	*Madden NFL 2005*	Electronic Arts	404k
15. (29)	*NBA Live 2005*	Electronic Arts	395k

<b>Table 1. Continued.</b>			
Rank (Overall rank)	Game	Publisher	Units Sold
16. (30)	NFL Street 2	Electronic Arts	390k
17. (31)	NBA Street V3	Electronic Arts	384k
18. (42)	Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	Electronic Arts	356k

Dunham (2006)

sufficient content for analysis. One important problem that the pre-test revealed was more time would be necessary to fully evaluate the games. While all previous video game content studies used play times of one hour or less, the vastly different method of analysis and the evolution of video game content into a fully immersive, customizable experience meant that play time for each game would have to be much longer and variable. While some games only have one mode of play, others have many different features and ways of playing, making a specific timeframe too constrictive for this study. The availability of games outside the study and the explorative nature of the study led to the use of alternate games to get some perspective of the intended methods. Because no similar studies could be found in the literature, it was important to try the methodology before using the actual games to avoid problems with the first games. This was seen with the time limit. The pre-test allowed for a more equal treatment of all the games going into the study, rather than trying to experiment with the methodology once gameplay started.

## Chapter IV

### RESULTS

This chapter describes the games and specifically their portrayal of female characters. First the games will be individually described to give a perspective of what sports content is contained in the 15 best selling sports games in 2005. Following the individual game descriptions, the overall amount of females found in these games will be described. Third, gender bias in the games will be described before the chapter concludes with a description of the heterosexualization of female characters in the games.

#### *Game Descriptions*

1. *Madden NFL 06* is the latest edition of an incredibly popular series of football games. Selling almost three million units, the game sold more than double the amount of copies of the second game on the list. *Madden NFL 06* has a number of game modes, with franchise and “NFL superstar” being the most in-depth. The superstar mode creates a football player from birth, even going as far as showing the profile of the player’s imaginary mother and father. Based on their “genes,” the player’s position and characteristics are determined. The user then lives the life of the player; taking IQ tests, attending practice, getting drafted, and playing the games. Franchise mode allows players to take control of an NFL team and control coaching, players, trainers, and many other aspects of the team. The user can then take control of the team and players during the game.

2. *Gran Turismo 4* is a graphically realistic car racing simulator. It is billed as the most realistic racing game on the market, and features near-photo realistic images within the game. There are no characters in the game other than the scripted cut-scene intro which briefly shows a pit crew servicing the cars. The main mode of play is the “career” mode, where players try to collect points and money by winning races on various courses all over the world. While the game strives for realism, car damage is far from realistic, as cars can drive at top speed into walls and continue with only a very slight delay. Physical realism is somewhat lacking due to the unrealistic nature of the car handling and crash consequences.
3. *NCAA Football 06* is the only NCAA licensed football game that aims to be a realistic simulator of a player’s progression out of high school, through college, and eventually into the NFL. There are two featured modes, one which focuses on the player aspects (development, playing games, and eventually winning the Heisman trophy and entering the NFL). The other main mode allows players to create a college program, including building a stadium, recruiting players and coaches, making a schedule, and eventually winning a national championship. This puts players in the role of administrator, although they can take control of the team during games. The playable characters in the game are players on the field, but there are also non-playable coaches, trainers, and fans.

4. *MVP Baseball 2005* is a licensed Major League Baseball simulator. It allows the player to take control of a team in two different ways, one from the “franchise” perspective which takes an established major league team and makes the user build a stadium, fan-base, and team cohesion from scratch. A similar “owner” mode has slightly less features, but still requires the player to manage the finances, fans, and players on their team. Like other team-sport games, the playable characters are the baseball players on the team, and there are non-playable coaches and fans.
5. *NBA Live 06* is a “realistic” NBA basketball simulator. It puts the player in control of a NBA team and allows them to play through their team’s schedule of games for the season. Visually the game is quite realistic, with players looking quite similar to their real-life equivalents. It offers some ways of controlling the team such as potential trades, but does not have coaches, trainers, or other staff available. The gameplay is more realistic than the other basketball game in the top 15, *NBA street V3*, but certain game modes such as the slam dunk competition are not very physically realistic.
6. *Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition* is a car racing game that involves “tuner” racing (production cars which are modified by racers). There are only two modes to play, career and arcade. Arcade mode sets up quick races with pre-defined cars, while career mode lets users start with a basic car and customize it with money made from race winnings. The characters in the

game are seen before some races, where 5-10 people will be standing around the start line looking at the cars and eventually starting the race. In career mode you also get the chance to race characters by name only, however the race is really against a faceless car. The main goal of the game is to race these cars on circuits around real-life cities such as Atlanta and San Diego.

7. *Need for Speed Most Wanted* is another racing game that focuses on tuner racing through street courses. Users have the options of various modes, but the main “career” mode is the most developed. The game is unique in that it features only live actors for its cut scenes, and has no computer-generated characters. The user faces numerous racing “challenges” from other racers. The player has no physical character in the game, and you cannot see into the car when driving.
8. *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland* is a skateboarding and BMX biking game. It has two main modes, a career mode which has a very involved storyline and the “classic” mode that features different cities with more basic mission objectives. Both modes allow you to choose your character, however the career mode forces you to select from a list of pre-generated characters. The primary objective is to skate and bike through the various locations and perform specified tricks or compete against other skaters and bikers in competitions. The career mode is quite immersive and features a

complex storyline which the player progressed through, winning and losing friends and meeting new characters along the way.

9. *Major League Baseball 2K5* is an ESPN and MLB licensed baseball simulator that features a multitude of game modes. The presentation of the game mimics ESPN's baseball television presentation almost exactly. The copy of the game that I received, however, was almost unplayable due to audio glitches.
10. *Burnout 3: Takedown* is a car racing game that is somewhat graphically realistic but focuses on physically unrealistic gameplay. The only character in the game is a DJ that is only heard over the radio. There are no visible characters in the game, and the cars that the player races against are only cars which have no human element. In addition to the normal racing modes, *Burnout 3: Takedown* has a "crash" mode where the primary objective is to cause the most possible amount of damage with one crash (often into a crowded intersection).
11. *Fight Night Round 2* is a boxing game that features very realistic graphics and is also physically realistic. The main mode of play is the career mode where the player creates a boxer from a vast array of options and begins fighting their way up the all-time boxer rankings. Famous boxers from different eras are included in the list, and by participating in training sessions and fights the boxer gets stronger and accumulates more money which can be used for equipment, trainers, and other features. The most

striking feature of the game is its realism. Graphically, the fighters are extremely detailed, and animations of the movement are very lifelike. Between rounds the user takes control of the trainer and must ice the boxer's cuts. The between-round mini-game shows the fighter's often bloody face in great detail.

12. *Blitz: The League* is a rather unrealistic football simulation that puts the user in both player and coach roles. Along with the quick play mode, the primary game mode is the franchise mode. Franchise mode puts the user in the role of owner of a relocated generic football franchise (the game does not have an NFL license) and allows them to select the main elements of the team (coach, star player, trainer, stadium). The game has a storyline to the mode as well, with a mayor trying to control the action and hindering the player's efforts. The main focus of on-field action is the element of big plays and big hits. Injuries seem to be a common occurrence, with in-game x-rays of specific fractures superimposed on the screen to enhance the effect.

13. *NBA Street V3* is a cartoon-like impression of street basketball. NBA players are used and graphically the characters look like their real-world counterparts, however gameplay is very unrealistic. Players can jump to amazing heights almost regardless of size, and difficult dribbling tricks can be executed nonstop by any player (regardless of actual dribbling skill). The career mode of the game allows the user to create a character,

select other players for a team of 3, and advance through various basketball games in different locations. The easy gameplay makes the game easier to play than other sports games that strive for accuracy.

14. *NFL Street 2*, like *NBA Street V3*, uses NFL players in an unrealistic, arcade-style version of football. The gameplay is very similar to *NBA Street V3* in that physical limitations are discarded to allow characters to move in ways impossible in the real world. The game features a familiar career mode that takes the player through character creation, team selection, and playing game to earn money and a reputation. As with *NBA Street V3*, *NFL Street 2* aims for ease and excitement of gameplay rather than extreme accuracy in game details.
15. *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06* is an incredibly realistic golf simulator. Players take control of a golfer in the game and advance through various time periods to eventually challenge Tiger Woods as the best golfer ever. The game features real courses around the world in striking detail and replicates the club selection process, terrain reading, and swing execution accurately. Equipment from each era is also available. Players face individual challenges from both real and created golfers as well as play PGA tour tournaments.

#### *Common Features*

While the content of these fifteen games is quite diverse, they do have many common aspects that will be summarized here. One feature that stands out in all of the

games is the franchise/career/owner mode that all of the games have. Sports video games have evolved from simply selecting a team and playing a game to an interactive, immersive experience often with extensive story-lines that draw users into the action. A second common theme to the games was the increasing ability to shape the characters in the game as the user chooses. This ability adds to the already immersive storylines to further enhance the user's experience. A final theme common to the games was the tension between graphical realism and physical unrealism. Game developers often use realism when convenient to them to increase the immersive aspects of the game, but neglect to use reality when it interferes with fun gameplay.

#### *Immersive Content*

The career modes of these games make them more than just sports games and force the user to execute financial strategy, personnel management, and aspects that would be more commonly found in strategy games. Although all of the games had some type of quick play option to get directly to the action, the career modes were polished and developed to the point that the yearly updates to the games seem to exclusively focus on the story or options of the career mode(s) rather than actual gameplay. The storylines and career modes of the games made the extended play necessary.

The interactivity of the games is a dramatic shift from previous generations of sports games and video games in general. There are not "levels" like in traditional games where you simply defeat one series of characters to get to the next. Games such as *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland* and *Need for Speed Most Wanted* allow you to roam the streets of imaginary (and real) cities and engage different characters as you find them.

While there is a progression to these games, this progression is defined by the user rather than the games themselves. The cut-scenes in *Blitz: The League* which tell the story of your team's interactions with the city mayor and other teams are dependent on how you play the game. The well-developed storylines also draw users into the game.

Previous generations were unable to develop such stories through the game due to graphic and storage capacities of the game systems. The current generation of game systems (Microsoft XBOX, Nintendo GameCube, and Sony Playstation 2) have the ability to use live-action video and highly detailed computer animated cut-scenes to intensify and enhance normal gameplay. Figure 1 shows a picture from the introductory cut-scene for *Gran Turismo 4*. The graphics and content can be enhanced for cut scenes because they contain pre-rendered action rather than user-controlled gameplay. This scene shows subtleties not found in the normal gameplay such as pit crew members, camera operators, and detailed lighting effects.

One of the best examples of the movie-like storylines is *Blitz: The League*. The game starts out with cut-scene of the dramatic last play of the final game of the previous season, where the user's team loses and is relegated to a lower division. A subsequent scene depicts the owner's reaction and negotiations with the city mayor to fund a new stadium and re-build the team. The user's mission becomes to win the league championship and bring the team back to prominence. Before every game there are more cut-scenes detailing the user's team's history with the opponent, and after select games more cut scenes between the team owner and mayor are shown. These cut-scenes make the game much more than just a season with wins and losses on the line. The user has a



**Figure 1. Introductory Cut-scene in *Gran Turismo 4*.**

The detail in light reflection, pit crew members, the camera operator, and other aspects of the picture are far more graphically realistic than the actual gameplay. When properly used, such cut-scenes can greatly enhance the immersive nature of the game.

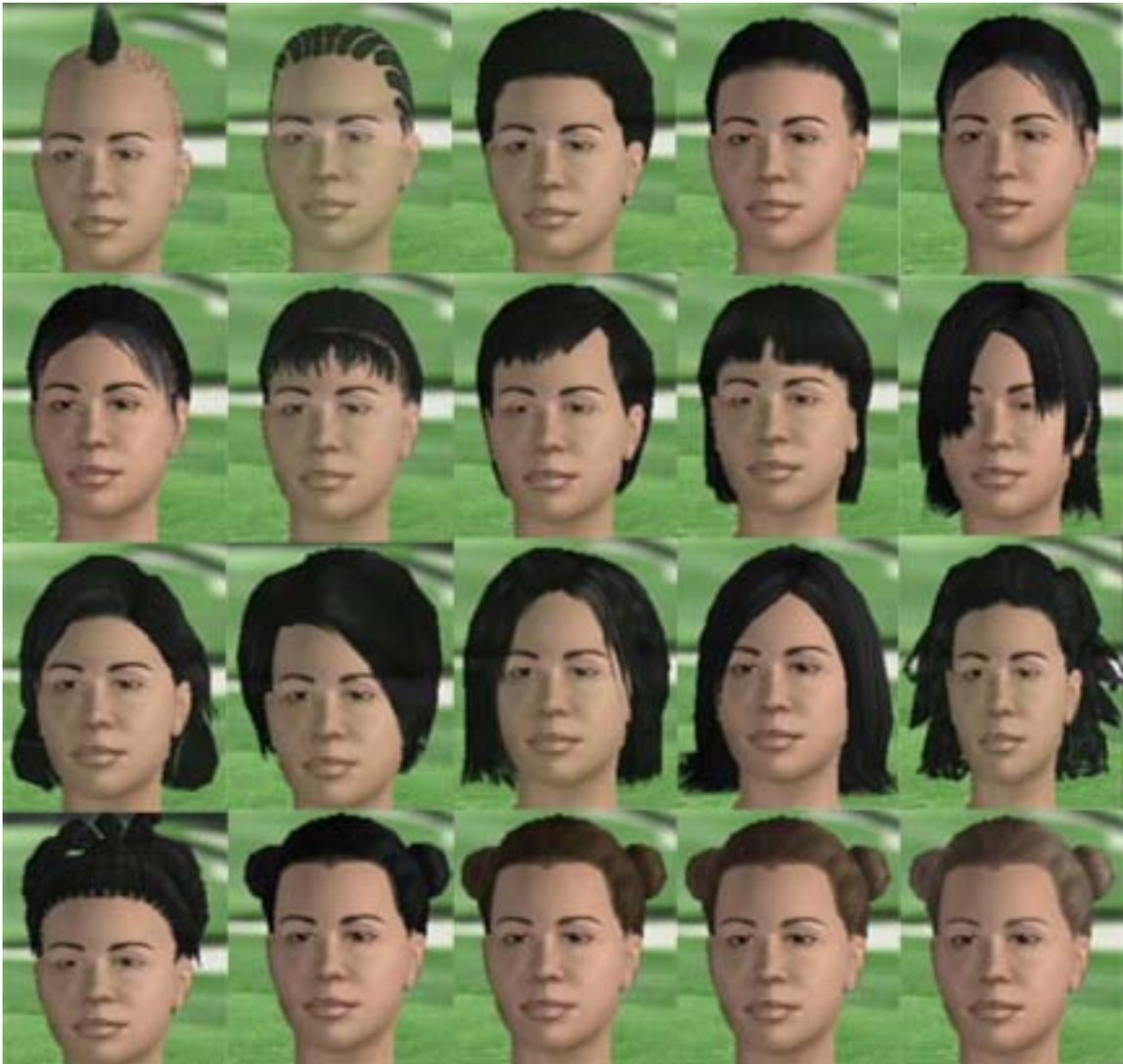
bigger mission, they must please the fans, the owner, and their players to achieve success in the game as a whole. Simply winning football games is sometimes not enough for the owner. Many other games share these broader goals, making the game more than just about the sport. With a whole city and franchise riding on the user's actions and results, there is much more importance to the mission of the game. In addition to simply playing the games, users must win games and sell tickets to make money that can be used on equipment for the team. Outfitting the team, choosing treatment options for injured players, setting ticket prices, and choosing how to train the team add to the overall sport experience by allowing the user to control all aspects of the team.

Other games have similar story-line based gameplay. *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2006* requires users to win various scenarios (longest drive, closest to pin putting, 4 holes) to gain money and progress through the game. The money that comes from winning is used to buy new equipment, which increases the player's ability. To advance in the game, the user must continue to buy new equipment to advance up the all-time ranking list. The game also features a constant movement between different eras of golf, changing the layout of the clubhouse and the player's opponents. As the player travels through time, they eventually interact with the various legends of golf from every era. *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland* also has an extremely in-depth storyline. The user's character comes from a rural setting, entering Los Angeles with no friends and a simple desire to skate. The character is immediately befriended by Mindy, who knows all about the stake scene in town. She introduces the character to a who's who of the skating world, and guides the user into completing the multitude of missions that are available. As the

story progresses, the missions are set up to eventually make Mindy upset with the character and have a falling-out (once her guiding role is not needed). Upon completion of the game, Mindy comes back and eventually becomes the main character's girlfriend. These extensive storylines make the games much more immersive than simply playing an individual game in any sport or even taking a team through a season. Career and manager modes give users a reason to play the game extensively, and provide a deeper experience than a movie or television show would due to the length of the gameplay and the interaction and immersion of the user within the story.

#### *Created Content*

One of the increasingly developed aspects of the interactive features in the games is the ability to create your character. Users can select height, weight, muscle definition (often on individual body parts), hair style, facial features, clothes, and more. Figure 2 provides an example of the extensive options that users can manipulate, in this case among hair styles, but the options are found for virtually every aspect of the body. This customization further draws players into the game and attaches them to their virtual character. Users can create players in the game that look very similar to themselves or create completely different visualizations. This user-defined content adds to the non-linear, non-programmed nature of this generation of video games. Previous video games relied on the programmers and artists of the software to determine characters in the game, however this is becoming increasingly less prevalent. While many aspects of these games are programmed and determined by the content creators, more and more features of the game are becoming user-created.



**Figure 2. Sample Hair Styles in *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2006*.**

*Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06* gives the user extensive control over their character's appearance. This figure shows most of the hair style options for female characters in the game. Hair color can also be selected as shown in the bottom row.

In *Madden NFL 2006*, for example, users can not only create their football player, but also create different fans that are used in cut-scenes after positive plays in the game. *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland* features the ability (and requires) users to create their own graffiti symbol that can be developed from an almost unlimited number of symbols, logos, shapes, and text. This symbol is used throughout the game to earn money and other unlockable features. These aspects of the game add to the overall effect of putting the user in control of the action rather than simply following a directed path without any control.

In addition to the user-created content within the game, online play allows users to communicate and create their own style of games with other users around the world. This study did not explore the online features of the games, however it is important to note that online content creation is possible with the high-speed internet access connection that the Playstation 2 and other current-generation game consoles have. Almost all of the games in the study have a network play option, which often allows users to chat over the network in addition to playing the actual game.

#### *Use of Realism*

A final overall aspect that was prevalent in the top 15 games was the visual realism that the games have. Even in games that aim for a cartoon-like look, characters are quite detailed and bear striking resemblance to their real-life counterparts. Some games such as *Need for Speed Most Wanted* even use recorded video of real actors to supplement the computer-generated graphics. Very little adjustment needs to be made to make the video blend seamlessly with fabricated elements. In previous generations of

games, video would be very clearly different than in-game graphics and stand out due to the limited graphical characteristics of the game. Because of the life-like graphics presently available to game programmers, the difference between video and generated animation has become so small that it is possible to use both side-by-side. Figure 3 shows an in-game screen from *Gran Turismo 4* showing how life-like the graphics can be.

Contrasting with the graphical realism in the games, most games are physically unrealistic. Characters in the games can jump higher, run faster, and perform actions far more complex than real people can. These capabilities make the games more entertaining and accessible for some users (shortening the learning curve for actions and creating a sense of fantasy,) but can take away from the overall experience of the game. *Gran Turismo 4* is an example of the unrealistic physical nature of a game hurting its overall impact. While the game contains life-like graphics in all features of the racing experience (scenery, cars, overall environment, and road conditions) shown in figure 3, and strives for a driving system that mimics real driving conditions using a force meter for all that adjusts due to acceleration, breaking, and cornering (below the speedometer in the figure), crashes have no effect on the car, driver, or race. Driving at maximum speed into a solid wall simply stops the car and the driver must simply reverse away from the wall and continue the race as normal. Almost all of the car racing games have this level of unrealistic gameplay. Certainly game designers realize that gameplay would be much more difficult if the real-life consequences of crashing your car were applied in the game and choose to apply arcade-style physical characteristics to enhance playability



**Figure 3. Realism in *Gran Turismo 4*.**

Despite issues of resizing and copying the picture from the game into this document (making the picture slightly more blurry than in the game), the clouds, road, trees, and background are near photo-quality.

Other sports games take similar approaches to make games accessible for more users rather than placing physical limitations on characters to make gameplay “real.” The “Street” series of games (*NBA Street V3* and *NFL Street 2*) focus on arcade-style action by giving players extreme jumping, running, throwing, and catching abilities. This ability is demonstrated in figure 4, which shows a character jumping above the backboard in *NBA Street V3*.

By using a simple game design, users can play the game much easier than more realistic game designs that feature complex series’ of control that take numerous tutorials and practice sessions to learn. To compare the NFL football games, *NFL Street 2* requires the user to push one button to hike the ball, then another button to pass to a receiver. *Madden NFL 06* requires users to use a field vision system that requires: the use of one button to hike the ball, another combination of two buttons pressed at the same time to look at a specific receiver (or the use of an alternate directional control to manually select where the quarterback is looking), and finally press the button corresponding to the correct receiver with the correct pressure and duration to complete a pass. Users can also use the alternate directional button while passing to select specifically where in relationship to the receiver the ball will go (high, low, ahead, behind) to better place the ball away from defenders. This action must be completed while using the primary directional buttons to evade oncoming defenders. While this system is complex and difficult to learn, the results when completed effectively can still be quite unrealistic. Receivers catch balls thrown to them with three or even four defenders around them without any problems if the pass is thrown correctly.



**Figure 4. *NBA Street V3* Gameplay.**

Despite realistic characters and backgrounds, *NBA Street V3* has very little physical realism.

The common unrealistic features of these games all contribute to the accessibility and fun of the games. Creating a strong relationship between the users and characters in the game means that more is at stake for the user if he or she develops an attachment to the character in the game. By allowing users to define how they wish to be portrayed, game developers create the opportunity for more interaction with the game than a pre-defined character would. The immersive nature of this generation of sports games adds to this interaction by placing users in a developed storyline rather than simply allowing them to play isolated games. Finally, gameplay is accessible enough to enjoy without the sometimes very strict limitations that reality imposes. By not only containing hundreds of hours of possible gameplay but including these addictive characteristics to draw users into taking advantage of the expanse of gameplay, the games on the 2005 top selling list have obviously created the correct formula for video game success.

#### *Amount of Female Characters*

The first thing that is noticeable when playing these games was the overall lack of female characters. While traditional team sports games (baseball, football, basketball) games were based on the men's professional league, other, more individual sports games also primarily featured men. Despite the male basis for the team games, one might expect female fans in the crowd, but often none can be found. The lack of female fans, however, could also be due to the lack of programmer/graphical attention fans receive in many of

While the on-field action and players are extremely detailed, often crowds become an undistinguishable mass of color rather than individual models. Figure 5 shows a typical view of the stadium within a game. One of the most surprising results was that only three



**Figure 5. Typical Game Crowds.**

This typical view of the crowd in current-generation games (from *NCAA Football 06*) shows very little distinction between individuals in the stands

games, *NCAA Football 06*, *Blitz: The League*, and *Fight Night Round 2* even featured sideline/ringside cheerleaders.

The few women present in games simulating male sports might be expected, but individual sport games do not have the limitation of a male-centered league. These other sport games still did not contain female characters on a consistent basis, however. About half of all the games contained female characters in some form, but their roles greatly varied from game to game. Very few games (*Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06*, *NBA Street V3*, and *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland*) featured playable female characters. It is important to note that many of the car racing games contained no recognizable characters marked by gender.

Overall, the lack of female characters is an important facet of the overall representation of women in sports video games. Not being portrayed in a game has important meaning just as being portrayed in a specific way does. Numbers and frequency are not the primary goal of this study, however, and a much more complete description of the roles and characterization of the women in the games follows.

#### *Roles of Female Characters*

As described above, female characters are relatively scarce in the sports games in this study. This overall lack of representation makes their role insignificant in many games. Having no role in the games that feature no women characters is important to note, as it eliminates them from representation in that sport for users of the game. The majority of games that did not have any female characters fell into two categories: team

games that focus primarily on male leagues and car games that have no characters, male or female.

Games that do feature women portray them in a very diverse way. From ring-side props to fully-playable characters, games in the top 15 list vary greatly in terms of the roles that women play in sport. One of the most stereotypical representations of women in the sports games is as sideline cheerleaders. A second type of role that females play is that of computer-controlled opponent. A final method of representation is that of fully-playable character that the user can generate, customize, and control. These three types or roles are described here.

Two games (*Blitz: the League* and *NCAA Football 06*) use cheerleaders both in-game on the sideline and more often in cut-scenes. The cut scenes in both games have cheerleaders posing and dancing in very revealing positions and, like other forms of media, use provocative camera angles to show the dances. Figure 6 provides an example of sideline cheerleaders in *NCAA Football 06*. Other games, such as *Fight Night Round 2*, also put women in non-active, supportive roles. *Fight Night Round 2* allows you to buy bikini-clad entourage women before each match which enhance your ability to recover from hard punches during the match. The pre-fight cut scene features various angles of the crowd, both player introductions, and each player's ring-side women. During the match a female is shown holding up the clock at the bottom of the screen, and between rounds the selected woman walks around the ring holding the "round" sign. This portrayal is shown in figure 7. Figure 7a shows a between-round cut scene where a member of the fighter's entourage is displaying a sign (as well as her body) to the crowd.



**Figure 6. Cheerleaders in *NCAA Football 06*.**

Like college football telecasts, *NCAA Football 06* features cut-scenes of cheerleaders in action.



Figure 7a, which is taken from a cut scene between rounds.



**Figure 7. Sample *Fight Night Round 2* Scenes.**

Figure 7b, from a pre-fight introduction scene.



**Figure 7. Continued.**

Figure 7c. The woman at the bottom of the screen is somewhat overshadowed by the primary visuals of the fight, but small details such as these are important to further immerse players in the action of the game.

The next image, figure 7b is taken from the introductions which play before each fight, and illustrates a striking difference between the fighter and his escort. Figure 7c illustrates the fine detail developers have added to the game, with small women holding the time remaining clock at the bottom of the screen. The user also has the option to purchase a male trainer before each round, however the trainer has a more concrete role (in the “training” mode preceding each match) than the female escort (who merely walks around the ring before and during the match). This portrayal of women as objects for males’ viewing enjoyment echoes their role in many top sports in other forms of media, and this connection will be discussed later in the analysis section.

A second theme of female portrayal in the games was as non-user playable opponent characters. These females were often stereotypical character-types such as “the punk,” “the sexy tease,” and “the tomboy.” While not recognized as such, the dress and characterization of these characters followed various stereotypes of females in sport and beyond. These non-playable characters were integrated into the game in various ways such as a short background before the first tee in *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06* or a detailed cut-scene featuring a still picture, detailed narrative about the character, and live-action video of the character in *Need for Speed Most Wanted*. The development of these characters varies from game to game, with some games spending very little time on character development (*Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06*) and others (*Tony Hawk’s American Wasteland*) giving users a movie-like experience with very detailed and expansive development of both the user’s character and their best-friend (a female). Figure 8, taken from *Tony Hawk’s American Wasteland*, shows Mindy, the user’s in-game friend and



**Figure 8. Interaction in *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland*.**

Mindy (right) is the primary non-playable character in *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland*. She guides the user through the game, suggesting what to do, and develops a relationship with the user's character (which can be altered to a certain extent).

guide, who is depicted as a stereotypical “punk” character. *Blitz: The League* also develops a storyline that features a female mayor who is often critical of the team’s progress.

Often these games use female characters on the lower end of the user’s progress, with less skill and power than the later, increasingly male, opponents. Male characters are also portrayed in stereotypical roles (shown in figure 9), so the problem can be applied to both sexes. The use of female characters in games based on the male professional league or association is interesting, however.

A final way (that only three games in the study used) of female’s roles in sport video games was full playability. Only two games, *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06* and *NBA Street V3* allowed users to fully create and use female characters in all modes of the game. *Tony Hawk’s American Wasteland* allows players to select and customize a female character in one of the game’s two modes. In these games, the female characters progress at an identical pace as their male counterparts (based on user skill level). In *NBA Street V3*, females and males of the same skill level were able to jump, block shots, and dunk with equal effectiveness. *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06* and *Tony Hawk’s American Wasteland* also give females the same abilities as the men in the game, with ability based on a skill meter that the user must work to develop. Physical representation of the characters in these games has no effect on the abilities of the virtual athletes

### *Gender Bias*

Very few games had explicit gender bias in commentary or presentation. While roles and amount of coverage of male and female characters differed, when genders were



**Figure 9. Stereotypical Character in *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06*.**

“The Sultan” is one of the many stereotypical characters, male and female, found in *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06*.

equal in roles and coverage (which was rare) there was no difference in content. Two main characteristics of gameplay, commentary and visual presentation (hype) were identical for male and female playable characters.

The games that feature both male and female playable characters (*Tony Hawk's American Wasteland*, *NBA Street V3*, and *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06*) treat all characters the same, regardless of gender. Just as much “hype”/respect was used for female characters playing well as male characters – “You don’t want to try to shoot on her” – *NBA Street V3*. Differences are only in the visual representation of the character, with gender characteristics treated as physical (as other games treat height or muscle size). The same introductions and visual elements are used.

Commentary is very similar to visual presentation. In games where female characters were playable, commentators referred to them appropriately. Gender of the character only changes “he” or “she” as a small part of the pre-recorded comments, and does not alter the overall commentary of the game. The same recorded comments were used for both male and female characters, with the appropriate gender put in during gameplay.

#### *Heterosexualization of Female Characters*

In games where women were playable characters, there is a very equal treatment of men and women. Users can buy the clothes for each gender (mostly the same clothing options), and make characters (male or female) look as realistic or unrealistic as they wish. Only three games did feature fully playable female characters, however, so more important are the games which only have secondary, pre-generated female characters.

These games that do not have playable female characters and games that feature pre-generated female characters follow traditional patterns of female portrayal.

In games where the female characters are not user-defined and playable, there were characteristics of making women as hetero-sexy as possible. *Fight Night Round 2* is a prime example of this portrayal. All of the women are wearing small bikinis, have voluptuous breasts, and are featured only as props to hold clocks or escort players into the ring. The combination of this visual portrayal and the roles, discussed above and shown in figure 7, of the women in *Fight Night Round 2* combine to emphasize the “eye-candy” role that women have in the game.

*Blitz: the League* also features revealing camera angles of the cheerleaders during breaks and after scores. The women are graphically far less realistic than *Fight Night Round 2*, but still uses those camera angles to show voluptuous women with virtually no clothing on. Figure 10 shows some of the dance routines that cheerleaders perform during the game. The game models the cheerleaders on real women, and features unlockable photos of the real-world models on the beach in bikinis (figure 10). The roles and representation of females in these games are all based on characteristics that epitomize traditional gender roles. Developers use specific clothing and supportive roles of females in these games to take advantage of traditional gendered characteristics to emphasize the character’s sex.



Figure 10. Representation of Women in *Blitz: The League*.



Figure 10. Continued.



Figure 10. Continued.

The representation of cheerleaders in *Blitz: The League* pushes the boundaries of what is appropriate in even a Mature-rated video game.

## Chapter V

### ANALYSIS

The results of this study clearly echo previous research on both women in sports media as well as the limited research on women in video games. The most prevalent example of this support is the overall lack of female characters in the games. The symbolic annihilation demonstrated by Messner (2002) and others in many forms of sport media is clearly found in these popular sports video games. A second theme also common in sports settings, hetero-sexualization, is found in many of the sports video games, but others have avoided such portrayals of women in various ways. One theme common in sports media, trivialization of women *athletes* (when included in games), was not found in the video games. Compared to previous research on video games and other forms of sports media, some aspects of the roles and portrayal are improving while other aspects remain detrimental to women's advancement in sport.

#### *Lack of Female Characters*

As noted in the results section above, the most notable characteristic of these video games is the overall lack of female characters. Like previous video game and sports media studies, male characters vastly outnumber female characters in the present study. As a form of sports media, sports video games have many of the same characteristics as television, radio, and newspaper coverage in terms of gendered content. The results of this study also support the notion that sports video games, as a subset of video games in general, lack broad female representation.

The problem with this lack of representation, as previous studies have argued, is that without female characters in these games players are left with the impression that they do not exist in the sporting world. As sports simulators, which most of the games in this study aim to be, the games fail to provide a complete experience by lacking any female characters. To give a specific example, the “major 3” (baseball, football, and basketball) sports’ games: *Madden NFL 06*, *NBA Live 06*, and both of the Major League Baseball games all failed to include female fans. While the games generally use repeated characters with only enough detail to vaguely determine gender, age, or race, when specifically looking at members of the virtual audience of these games or when games have specific cut scenes featuring the crowd, it is nearly exclusively male. Figure 11 shows the crowd models of *NBA Live 06*, with two identical males sitting next to each other. The “create-a-fan” mode in *Madden NFL 06* only allows the creation of male fans despite the obviously mixed gender of actual game crowds.



**Figure 11. Repetition of Fans.**

As Messner (2002) has suggested, this lack of representation results in a symbolic annihilation of women from the world of sport for players of these games. It is important to recognize that video games are different than traditional forms of media because they are a virtual representation of the sport and league rather than a documentation of the event (as television highlights, newspaper articles, or radio shows are). This makes it possible that the lack of female representation in the games simply makes the games less realistic (*Blitz: The League's* lack of an official NFL license and use of imaginary teams and players) rather than a deliberately unbalanced representation. The overall lack of female characters in these games, however, de-legitimizes their presence in real-world sport. As Costa (2002) has found, when women and girls are featured in the media as sports participants, overall participation for female athletes increases. Because of this, not only do females of all ages benefit from increased exposure in video games, but video game producers also stand to gain new users.

Some game developers might argue that fan models and customization are simply not developed and realistic enough to include full representation of women. In some cases this is a legitimate shortcoming of current generation games. The power of the console is limited, and detailed fan rendering is impossible while trying to maintain on-field action. The generic models of fans will hopefully become more detailed and diverse in the next generation of games. The inability for some games to create female fans (when you can create any type of male fans) and the lack of female fans in pre-rendered cut-scenes cannot be explained with this “limited power” argument. Featuring female fans in both user and developer-based content would not only add to the realism of the

game, but would also avoid the common sports media problem of leaving a significant part of their community out of their representation of the event.

Another aspect of a representation for a significant number of games was the complete lack of characters in the game at all in car simulation games. This could have been done for technical reasons (developers used all processing and rendering power on game physics and external graphics) or stylistic preference (developers wanted to let the user imagine themselves in the car rather than use a pre-rendered or user-created avatar) by game designers. That decision (or genre convention) makes car racing games a primarily gender-absent genre within sports video games. Figure 12 shows how developers use reflective glass and ghost-like drivers to avoid modeling the drivers of the race cars.

Overall, none of the racing games contained rendered drivers, driving games that do feature external characters were generally even in number and skill level, and the representation of secondary characters was generally not exploitative in any of the games. If the lack of driving characters is stylistic, it is safe to assume that this convention will continue until technology allows actual images of the players as the driver. If next generation racing games are technologically advanced enough to add drivers with graphics equal to the exterior environment and/or developers find it necessary to add an avatar for the player as the driver of the car, they should allow full user-customization of the driver and avoid pre-generated archetypal characters (male or female).

Unlike other changes that can be made based on increased technical capabilities, the complete lack of female characters in many video games is due to the basis of the



**Figure 12. Ghost Drivers.**

Even in the pre-race scene of cars driving to the start line in *Gran Turismo 4*, the cars lack recognizable drivers.

games themselves. As long as the most popular video games are based on realistic simulations of popular men's leagues such as the NFL, MLB, and NBA, playable female characters will probably remain scarce. Like the reluctance to increase traditional media exposure for women based on the argument that the interest is not there, popular video games will probably mimic popular real-world sports. This can be seen as something that both hinders exposure for women in video games and an opportunity for creative developers to increase exposure. Because realistic simulations of the major men's sports will naturally exclude playable female characters, the increasing audience of video game players (both male and female, but particularly female) will want games that feature content that they are interested in. For many female players, this content will be female characters in the game that they identify with.

#### *Roles and Portrayal of Female Characters*

Not only is simply including female characters in the game important, but the roles and presentation of those female characters also is a key aspect of game development. While these very diverse portray female characters differently, there are trends that emerge from the content. First, there are major implications on content based on the purpose and design of each game. The design of the game determines overall representation of characters within that game. Despite these limitations, the roles and portrayal of pre-generated non-playable characters and the inclusion of playable characters can be greatly improved upon with examples found within the best selling list. Looking toward future games, the increased capabilities of gaming systems and games

themselves going into the next generation of consoles plays an incredibly important role in changing the portrayal and roles of female characters.

Two distinct approaches are taken by game developers when designing the content of a game: simulation and fantasy. Simulations strive for accuracy while fantasy games value fun, easy play, and artistic characteristics. These two approaches are developed on two levels of the game, physics (actual gameplay) and graphics. All of the popular games included in this study strive for graphical simulation but take diverging approaches to physical realism. As mentioned above, simulations of sport, especially of male leagues, provide limited opportunity to feature playable female characters. Because there are no female teams or players in the NBA, for example, a game designed as a simulation of the NBA would not be realistic if it featured developer-created female teams and players. The attempt of realism also provides an excuse for developers to base the portrayal of female characters on real-world examples. *NCAA Football 06* is a good example of this. EA games wants to provide the experience of a college football game to users, and scantily-clad cheerleaders are certainly a feature of most games. Just as EA features cut scenes of the mascot (figure 13), it includes cheerleaders as well. Taking them out of the game or changing their role or clothing would again take away from the realism that the developers try to create. Changing the roles and features of female players in the most popular “realistic” video games would require a shift in their real-world roles and features, or a shift in the popularity of men’s and women’s sports.



**Figure 13. It's in the Game.**

EA Sports' tagline "It's in the game" touts the developer's ability to re-create all aspects of the simulated sport, even down to the mascots (shown here in *NCAA Football 06*).

Some games, however, do allow female participation in simulation games.

The best example is *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06*. Despite being based on real-world courses around the globe, featuring an extremely complicated control system designed to mimic all aspects of a real swing, and using detailed physical features such as wind, slope, and grass length to effect shots, the physical ability of male and female golfers in the game is interchangeable. Players start out as an inexperienced golfer and complete challenges and tournaments to build their skills. Real-world golf is one of the few sports that women such as Michelle Wie, Suzy Whaley, Annika Sorenstam, and Se Ri Pak have been allowed to play in men's events, so their inclusion in *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06* is perhaps explained by a few examples. These real-life women have failed to make a 36 hole cut in any of the PGA tour events they have competed in and on average drive the ball shorter than the men on tour, but the game eschews these facts and provides equal abilities.

Fantasy games, on the other hand, are not restricted by this excuse to limit female roles and contain unrealistic, exploitative portrayals. Only vaguely based on real world physics, rules and regulations, and themes, fantasy games can portray men and women however the developer can imagine. The car racing genre has generally taken advantage of fantasy by allowing players to do far more damage to a car in the game than a real-life car could take in order to make the game more playable and enjoyable for users. Fantasy is the reason that many players enjoy video games: you can do things that are beyond your real-world capability in the virtual world of games. Developers have long been burdened by the responsibility that this freedom provides. The constant debate over video

games' violence illustrates one limit game producers have faced, but those same opposition groups have raised few objections over the gendered content of games.

Two contrasting examples of the use of the freedom that fantasy provides are *NFL Street 2* and *NBA Street V3*. Both of these games have been described perviously, however they illustrate two different approaches to very similar fantasy games by the same developer. Both games feature faster, stronger, and more agile characters than real-life players. Figure 4 represents *NBA Street V3*'s non-realistic physical nature. While the concept and format of both games is similar, their approach to female characters greatly differs. *NFL Street 2* features virtually no female characters, playable or non-playable. The only woman present in the game is as one of the few spectators on only one field of the game. Playable characters include both real NFL characters as well as pre-created and user-created male characters which can be customized in almost any way possible excluding gender.

*NBA Street V3*, on the other hand, allows users to chose and customize male and female characters as well as having pre-created female and male fictitious characters in addition to the NBA players in the game. The NBA players have higher skill levels than the fictitious characters (male and female), but even the female characters can be developed into better players than even NBA stars. The commentary of the game makes no distinction between the male and female characters except to appropriately refer to them as "he" or "she." The vast difference between the full playability of female characters in *NBA Street V3* and the near complete lack of them in *NFL Street 2* is interesting coming from the same developer and even the same series. *NBA Street V3*

provides an excellent example of how *NFL Street 2* and other fantasy games can include female characters in the game without sacrificing anything. A common “move” in *NFL Street 2* is to run sideways on a vertical wall to avoid defending players. Like the ability to jump literally over the rim in *NBA Street V3*, features such as this wall run remove the game from any sense of reality, and therefore should not be bounded by the “traditional” gender of players.

If more games implemented playable characters such as *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06*, *NBA Street V3*, and *Tony Hawk’s American Wasteland* do, female video game players would have more characters with whom they can relate, sports video games might attract more female players, and both male and female video game players would experience a more gender-balanced representation of sport. These games show that in either simulation of fantasy games, there are ways that developers can increase representation for females.

One of the other ways that many simulation games can improve the roles and representation for female characters in the game (other than fan models and creative implementation of playable characters) is to add female characters in other parts of the game. Most simulation games feature various agents, front office staff, coaches, trainers, and other off the field fake characters. These characters are completely developer-created, and sometimes have extensive background available. Despite real-life women increasing their presence in the sports industry, these video game characters are almost exclusively male. Adding female off-field characters, as *Blitz: the League* does with a female mayor, is a step in the direction towards balance in games based on men’s sport. This would avoid the typical portrayal of females as simply “eye candy” that previous

work in sports media has found (Bryson, 1987; Duncan et al., 1990; Wearden & Creedon, 2002). Adding women in decision-making and leadership roles as *Blitz: The League* and *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland* do is vastly different than what we typically see in traditional sports media. While some games (such as *Fight Night Round 2*, *NCAA Football 06*, and ironically *Blitz: The League*) continue to uphold the traditional portrayal of women as cheerleaders on the sideline, most games have stayed away from this problem.

Whether a game is based on fantasy or simulation, it is important to recognize the advances game developers are making to utilize technology to literally put users in the game. As game technology improves, the capability to for users to create new content within the game. This ability is demonstrated by “create-a-player” modes found in many games, which allows users to choose exactly how they are represented in the game. Shown in figure 2 and in figure 14, this ability allows the user to create a realistic or unrealistic portrayal of males and females in these games, and leaves representation truly up to the user. Other forms of sport media rely on the producer of the content to represent athletes of both genders, creating much debate among sports sociologists and psychologists over the effect of such portrayal. With increasingly user-generated content, this debate will need to shift from the effect of a fixed representation on users to the effect of the ability for users to create their own characters.

The ability for users to create their in-game character cannot be understated. Whether creating a male or female character, developers release control of the game's content and leave it up to users to develop their in-game representation. Representation



**Figure 14. Character Creation.**

Games such as *NBA Street V3* (shown here) allow users to create their characters as they see appropriate rather than have pre-developed representation.

can be realistic, unrealistic, exploitative, or empowering. This element of fantasy, present in any game regardless of the producer's intent, opens the door for, as some feminists would argue, "confusion" of sex characteristics (Haraway, 1991). In the virtual world, women can be men, men can be women, and characters can have characteristics and abilities completely independent of their physical form. The power of this virtual world gives users and developers a way to completely avoid the traditional boundaries of sex and gender.

*Tony Hawk's American Wasteland* allows the user to adjust many aspects of the in-game skater's body and clothing. Figure 15 shows two very different representations, one a very realistic, empowering representation of a female skater in appropriate clothing and normal body proportions (15a), and the other a very exploitative, unrealistic representation (15b). While the game allows male and female skaters equal ability, the visual representation can greatly change how the game is viewed.

The progression of sports video games has been from dots which move around the screen to near photo-realistic graphical representations of every aspect of the game. Next generation games, however, are going beyond graphical representations of the game and characters within the game. Games such as *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland* are beginning to use actual photos of users in the game as characters. *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland* uses a system where users E-mail a photo of themselves to the developer's Website and that photo is transformed into the facial characteristics of a downloadable in-game character. Other systems and games not found on the top 15 list use other methods.



**Figure 15. Differing Representations in *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland*.**

Figure 15a. A female skater in traditional skating clothes.



**Figure 15. Continued.**

Figure 15b. This representation of a female skater in boots, a skirt, and a tube-top is completely unrealistic and, at times (when performing inverted moves and during falls), exploitative.

Most notable among these is the Playstation “Eye Toy” system which is a camera that allows real-time images of users to appear to interact with in-game content. The next generation Xbox 360 console has a similar accessory. Technology such as the Eye Toy can reduce the pre-generated content of games significantly, as the user’s in-game character would simply be themselves.

Another feature of next generation video games that, along with real-time user in-game video, could change game content is the motion-sensing control of the Nintendo Wii. The primary input of Nintendo’s next console allows games to directly apply real-world motion of the controller into the game. The most notable game for the system, “Wii Sports” will come packaged with every Wii sold. An example of this technology would be in a baseball game the user would actually swing the controller through the air to hit the virtual ball on the screen. While not a change in the visual representation of characters, one effect of this technology could be that developers will no longer need a pre-set skill progression (often gendered in previous generations), and focus instead on user’s skill progression. More importantly, male or female characters will become further immersed in the game, making their visual representation much more important for the gaming experience.

Overall, the next generation of sports video games has new resources and capabilities that will allow increased user interaction in games. Some technologies will naturally provide better representation for female players, however others must be implemented in creative ways to ensure that both genders are appropriately portrayed in games. Games such as *NBA Street V3*, *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06*, and *Tony Hawk’s*

*American Wasteland* show that whether the game strives for complete accuracy in every detail or allows great freedom from traditional physical limitations for all athletes (regardless of gender), there are many ways to include both male and female playable characters. These games are examples of where the future of video game could and should be heading: fully customizable characters, users represented photographically in the game rather than computer generated, and non-playable characters are represented appropriately. The extensive interaction that new technology allows makes users increasingly responsible for the content of the game.

#### *Progress of the Industry*

Since title IX was introduced in 1972, significant progress has been made by women in the world of sport (Costa, 2002). Over that same period, an entire industry has been created based on video game technology. In the current generation of sports video games included in this study, female representation and portrayal has improved from previous studies on video games and other forms of sports media. Commentary of the sports video games, which has been extensively studied in both television and radio settings (Billings, Angelini & Eastman, 2005; Duncan, Messner, Williams & Jensen, 1990; Hallmark & Armstrong, 1999; Higgs & Weiller, 1994), was gender appropriate and contained no offensive remarks toward either gender. Presentation of playable characters shows no bias in performance or treatment by the game unlike previous studies (Capranica et al., 2005; Messner, Duncan & Cooky, 2003; Tuggle, 1997).

Simulation games, however, replicate real-world gender roles. One of the roles that continues to be reproduced by sports video games is the female cheerleader, on the

sideline and wearing revealing clothing supporting the male players on the field. While the cheerleader role is prevalent in real-world sports and game producers would be amiss if they left out one of the traditional roles that women have played in sports when trying to make realistic games, it is important is for game developers to also keep up with the progress that females have made in other areas of sport. Limiting women's characterization to traditional roles, as some of the games in this study do, does nothing to attract new users or innovate in the field of sports media. Unlike television, radio, media guides, and other traditional forms of sports media, video games allow complete control of content, with the game developers deciding to add as much "realism" as they want, and therefore gives them artistic license to depict gender in different ways. It is then up to consumers to decide what becomes popular.

Developer's reliance on traditional gender characteristics for female characters replicate the portrayal and emphasis on feminizing females in sports media as a whole. Like other forms of sports media, females who have emphasized feminine characteristics are rewarded with more coverage (Messner, 2002). The problem with this portrayal is that simply reinforces gender stereotypes to a broad range of new viewers. Even as female sports participation has increased (Costa, 2002), stereotypes and the representation of gender have not changed. While this study focuses on portrayal of the female sex (as opposed to gender), it is the alignment of the two that the video games, like other forms of sport media, accentuate.

One important aspect of this study is the focus on the most popular games. Rather than take a random sample of sports video games, only the most popular games are

represented here. There are games that feature female characters available for the PlayStation 2 game console, but the popularity of these top games gives them far more outreach than a typical game title has. With nearly 3 million copies of *Madden NFL 06* sold in 2005 alone and as the best selling video game of any genre in 2005, these top sports video games have a widespread influence with both a male and female audience. Because this study reviews the best-selling games rather than a random selection, the study becomes a sort of reflection of what consumers want. The selection of games is more of a popularity contest than a random sample. There are no WNBA or LPGA games on the market, for example, and the lack of representation makes it impossible for users to be exposed to the league. A smaller fan-base for women's sports, the majority male audience for sports video games, and the lack of previously developed women's sports games all probably contribute to the lack of many games featuring women athletes. This means that one way to increase the presence of women in both simulation and fantasy sports games would be an increased real-world presence.

Soccer is a comparable example in the United States as even the two main soccer game available, EA's *FIFA* series and the *Winning Eleven* series, would not show up on the top 50 list with their combined sales. Even as a male sport, the lack of overall popularity limits the outreach of a soccer game. These two soccer games prove, however, that software developers are willing to produce a game that might have somewhat limited reach. Like females in sport, soccer has mass-participation in the United States but lacks spectator and corporate interest, limiting it to a participation sport. Games like *FIFA* and *Winning Eleven* provide another avenue of exposure for the sport, and perhaps attract

new fans by creating name and team recognition in the game. Female sports games could provide a similar avenue for women's sports and leagues. If WNBA players were featured in *NBA Street V3* alongside the NBA players, the game could give gamers an interest in the league. EA also has experimented with a rugby game, showing once again that they do not only rely on the most popular sports for their titles. Because of these examples, there is no excuse for game developers to continue to produce games only based on male sports.

As the sports video game industry continues to advance graphics to photo-quality and user-created, the focus will become the content and playability of the games rather than what it looks like. As mentioned above, Nintendo is following this path with its next-generation console, the Wii. Instead of focusing on graphics and processing power, it is trying to improve the "fun factor" of games to attract more casual gamers, including girls and women. Other companies are still emphasizing increased graphical power and have more traditional controllers, but those systems also have the ability to vastly change how characters are represented in the game. The increasing online and interactive nature of games via online gameplay also reduces user's reliance on developers for in-game content. These advances as well as those mentioned above will provide the background for the next generation of video games.

### *Implications*

There are various implications based on this analysis. The first major implication of this study is that the video game industry can vastly improve on their portrayal of females in sports games. The overall lack of representation in sports games is a disservice

to both gamers and game developers. Game users would benefit from a greater selection of characters and female users specifically would be able to identify with the characters on a much deeper level. This would enhance the experience for male and female players, as games could become a more gender-balanced pastime. Developers can use the opportunity to attract new gamers to their games and systems by creating new markets for games. By representing girls and women playing sports in the video games, females who play those sports in real life might be interested in trying the video game equivalent.

A second implication of this research is that current video games are only adding to the overall socialization of gamers that women are not prevalent in sport. Media, parents, friends, siblings, and personal experiences are all important in the socialization of children in sport. Because traditionally females have been excluded from or delegitimized in sports settings, people continue to perpetuate the myth that females are not as good as males in the sporting realm. By adding female characters in sports video games, young males and females can see an instance where females are present, and whether the situation is realistic or not they will take that exposure to women in sports as one factor in their overall socialization. Even though it might seem like a small step, it can also lead them to see other instances where females might be present in sport as well. Because video games can lead to an interest in real world sport, both on the spectator and participant levels, games featuring women might be able to help women's sports gain exposure and participation.

A final major implication of this study is that it broadens the current academic knowledge on video games and sports media as a whole. By investigating these particular

games and looking at the current generation of consoles, the study analyzes new information that previous studies could not have accessed. While a new generation of consoles is imminent, the transition will likely take some time to make the current generation of games obsolete. With over 100 million units sold, the PlayStation 2 console will still be in many households for years to come. This critical update as to the technological status of the video game industry is as important as the analysis of content.

## Chapter VI

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to analyze the roles and portrayal of female characters in popular sports video games. The fifteen best selling sports video games for the PlayStation 2 video game system were played for an unspecified length of time and recorded for analysis. The first-hand gameplay and recorded video were analyzed using a qualitative research method to determine themes of female portrayal. The major themes for discussion found in the games were: (a) an overall lack of female characters, (b) an overall trend of heterosexualization of developer-created female characters, and (c) the delimitation brought by new technology which frees developers from creating gendered content and allows users to customize their representation. This chapter outlines conclusions taken from the analysis, recommendations for future study, and a look into the future of sports video games.

#### *Conclusions*

There are two major conclusions that can be reached based on the results of this study. As noted above, one of the most the most important conclusions is that a majority of popular games strive to simulate real-world sport, and therefore changes in sport will be replicated in sports video games. Because these games strive to replicate reality, there would have to be gender balance in real-life sports before we would see balance in video games. This balance is beginning to occur on the participation level, but at the professional level, men still dominate the sports world. Roles of females in games also depend to a great extent on the roles in real-world sport. The popularity of sports

simulation video games corresponds to the popularity of the real-life equivalent. All of these best selling games were based to some degree on reality and are designed to attract more mature players (as opposed to young cartoon characters playing sports), so it is clear that games based on recreational sports are much less popular than professional-based sports games on the PlayStation 2 console.

Equally important, however, is the fact that while games simulate reality, they are a primary method for users to leave reality and control virtually what they cannot control in real life (sports teams, players, and fast cars). The representation of females in future (and current) sports video games lies in the negotiation between fantasy and simulation. Due to the current lack of females in the most popular professional sports, the more fantasy elements a game contains, the more general opportunity developers have to include fully playable and functional female characters. As some games in this study have shown, however, it is possible to overcome this lack of females and take advantage of the freedom that a virtual world allows.

Regardless of whether games are based on simulation or reality, the increase in females within sports demands an increased presence in sports video games. The video game industry must try to avoid the traditional lack of representation of females in sport to not only gain new users, but to also increase the enjoyment of current users, both male and female. Newspaper and television sports coverage has changed little since the invention of video games. Video games, however, have come far in their treatment of sports and characters within sports video games. The ability to disregard limitations of reality in all forms is a primary reason for the current popularity of the video game

industry. Developers can use this ability to become a leader within sports media by including females in their games. By doing this, they can advance females within sport in various ways. Including more females in games will accomplish a number of positive things for women and girls in sport. First, it would give male and female users exposure to females in sports. This would have an effect on the overall socialization of users, especially young users, to advance the image of females in sport. Second, it would attract new gamers based on the participation and viewership of female sports. Finally, it would give female users representation in the game, enhancing their experience in the game.

#### *Future Research Recommendations*

Based on this discussion of the analysis, possibilities for future study include:

- 1) Using a different sampling technique to get a broader range of game titles.

Purposefully selecting games that feature female characters and games that target young players would give a better perspective of what developers are creating rather than what is popular with consumers.

- 2) Selecting a different game system to study. Nintendo's current generation Gamecube and next generation Wii focus much less on reality and more on fun gameplay. This means that their consoles have been popular among younger players, and developers have focused on that audience when making games.
- 3) Focusing on next generation consoles and games. As noted in the review of literature, video games are notoriously difficult to study due to the rapid pace of change in the field. Next generation games will feature more content overall,

more realistic content, and new ways of interacting with games which could alter female representation significantly.

- 4) Analyzing other types of popular games. Sports (as defined by this study, combining the “racing” and “sports” categories of the industry) accounted for only about 27% of total game sales in 2005 among all consoles. This is second to the “action” category that had 30% of total game sales (Entertainment Software Association 2006). Looking at other genres of video games could provide important perspective for how different genres represent female characters.

These recommendations would enhance the findings of this study by adding information about other video games. As a popular type of media, video games have not received as much academic attention as more conventional forms of media have. While not the most popular form of media, the increasing presence and rapid evolution of the industry require continued academic attention.

#### *Future Video Games*

While the next generation gaming consoles are approaching the marketplace rapidly, the content of sports games will take time to adapt to the new capabilities of the systems. Consumers and developers cannot change overnight, so the games in this study will likely be similar to games for at least the first part of the next generation. While Nintendo is developing a vastly different gaming platform to attract more casual gamers, the bulk of the next generation market will be the Xbox 360 and the Playstation 3. The Nintendo Wii is priced and seen as a second-console for “real gamers” due to its low cost (\$250 for the Wii versus \$500-\$600 for the Playstation 3 and Xbox 360, depending on

configuration), unique control device, and relatively lower processing power. Overall, the next generation is still focused on increasing graphics and faster processing. This means that content will continue to better replicate reality than current generation games.

As mentioned above, the increasing power of game consoles and new accessories will allow more interactive and user-defined content within video games. Developers still have control of the content, however. The value of this study and a continued academic interest in sports video game content is that they can illuminate the state of the industry compared to similar industries. Gender issues will always be important for developers as accessory characters and generic rendered characters will continue to be pre-created, and therefore looking into representation will be important. The decisions that those developers make will be somewhat dependent on real-world sports, but the fantasy world of video games gives them abilities that their counterparts in the traditional media do not have. They can take advantage of that opportunity to create gender balanced games or replicate what traditional sports media and previous sports video games have done and rely on stereotypical gendered representation.

There are various possible limitations to the industry recommendations listed above. One is the distribution of game programmers and developers. Just as the world of sports has remained a male-dominated realm, the video game industry is overwhelmingly male. When both of these characteristics are combined, the result is that females play a rather small role in sports video game development. The credits for most games feature almost exclusively male names, and while there are exceptions, generally males are responsible for the content. They will typically make what appeals to themselves, and

therefore the roles of females in these games could continue to be limited. A second limitation is that the users of games are typically seen as male. While females have made their presence known in the gaming world (Entertainment Software Association, 2006), the typical image of a gamer is a young male. As long as this is a stereotype within the industry, games will be made with this gamer in mind. Finally, tradition is a limitation to possible change in the industry. With games like the *Madden* series selling 3 million copies a year and topping the charts, there is little impetus for change. Hopefully these limitations can slowly be overcome by changing stereotypes and progressive game design. Developers often push the limits of technological capability, but they are also able to push the limits of social convention. Video games are creations of the imagination, yet have the power of widespread acceptance. They can therefore serve as important avenues for change in the sports media industry if developers take the opportunity.

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## Vita

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