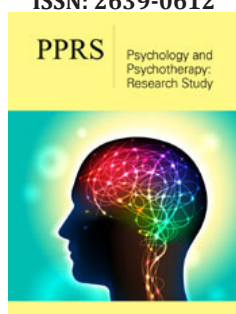


'Rape day'-A virtual Reality Video Game Causes Outrage

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Abstract

This article examines developments in relation to video games that promote sexual violence. It uses the example of a recent controversial video game 'Rape Day' that caused international outrage. Empirical evidence suggests that players who engage with sexual violence content in video games may experience a range of negative effects including desensitization, lower empathy towards victims/survivors and a propensity for violent behaviour. This review concludes that concerns mentioned in the literature highlight the need for further study of this new social reality.

Keywords: Objectification; Rape myth acceptance; Violent video games; Sexual assault; Sexual violence

Introduction

Sexual violence is connected to a complex interplay of societal attitudes and inequality. The video gaming space is often believed to be a 'male only space created by men for men' Henricksen [1]. Similarly, Salter & Blodgett [2] argued that the gaming acts as a 'boys club' that silences women's voices when they speak out against the dominant discourse of the male gamer identity. The term 'video game' refers to the general group of 'interactive, digital entertainment' Brand [3].

A new science, ludology, which is the study of game play, has recently emerged in response to the ever-increasing popularity of online video games [3]. Online video games are played by billions of people all over the world. According to Brand and colleagues, online games 'are a celebration of human imagination, innovation and culture'. In Australia, most people play in-depth games daily, with men and boys playing 98 minutes every day. The main reason reported is 'to have fun and pass the time'.

The portrayal of women in video games

In video games, female characters are commonly shown as hypersexualised and subordinate to male characters. Gestos [4] reported that men exposed to objectified and sexualized female characters within video games make them susceptible to sexist attitudes toward women in real-life settings. Women are used 'as a means to an end' in video games Gruenfeld [5]. Objectification is always related to power and control. In this regard, sexual objectification reduces women to their sexuality, which sustains sexism in contemporary society Roberts [6].

Lynch [7] outlined the masculine gaming culture that objectifies hypersexualised female avatars as a recreational activity. A number of commentators indicated that this type of video game is clearly 'male oriented' where female characters are portrayed as sexual objects. This can be observed by the way male and female characters are depicted Glick & Fiske 2001. While males usually are primary characters (strong, masculine, superior), female characters have sexualised attributes. It fundamentally subordinates women and inevitably paves the way for sexual violence Gervais [8]. Consequently, sexual objectification has an inherently negative effect on the perception of women in general, as well as 'through the lens of a male gaze present in the media'. Sexual objectification is widespread Cogoni [9] and denies women worthiness and human concern. Loughman [10] study found that objectification of women had 'important consequences for how people view victims of sexual assault'.

Objectification of women impacts on individuals' feelings of empathy and sexual behaviours Bareket [11]. In a study examining neural representations and behaviours, Cogoni [9] found reduced empathy for women who were subjected to gender-based violence. Research also found a positive association between objectifying media and sexual violence Galdi [12]. One extreme form of objectification is the depiction of rape in video games.

Violent video games

Violent video games have existed for several years, having emerged as a popular form of entertainment. They commonly objectify women and represent them in a sexualised way Henricksen [1]. It is concerning that rape features as a 'game' where players are controlling characters to sexually assault women.

Rape day

The world of gaming has become more dangerous-without any boundaries, which is evidenced in a video game called Rape Day. In the game, the player assumes the character of the most dangerous person in an apocalyptic city with decision making capabilities about his 'adventure'; as he has earned his 'rape day' Thied [13]. The game contains scenes whereby the strong masculine man identifies his 'trophy', a woman whom he rapes and otherwise sexually assaults. The game's aim is to rape and murder as many women as possible.

The independent game developer who calls himself Desk Plant, described the game, which he compared to the likes of Grand Theft Auto, as an adult dark comedy with the main character being a 'menacing serial killer rapist' Obrist [14]. He promised that gamers will have control over the character and be able to choose from a variety of sequences of still images with prewritten dialogue options and story choices. On the game's webpage the creator noted that the depiction of rape, which he believed to be rooted in men's biology, would be unlikely to have a negative influence on gamers.

Important questions need to be raised about the appropriateness of video games with the aim to rape and murder women. Admittedly, as Webb [15] noted the game is 'just one of several visual-novel games that have sexually explicit content with non-consensual sexual activity'. However, its promotion caused global outrage.

International outrage

The game elicited strong reactions all over the world. Unsurprisingly, Rape Day resulted in an international backlash after going online on 06 March 2019 Guggisberg [16]. Immediately, a petition was started on social media Derby [17], exerting community pressure that is believed to have contributed to Valve's decision to make the game unavailable through the Steam Direct gaming portal. The victory through the social media intervention was celebrated online Consenza [18].

Not only was Rape Day banned in European countries such as Germany, but politicians became involved, calling for more restrictive legislation. For example, in a press release, the Austrian politician Barbara Huemer expressed concern that the video game

was not immediately banned Grüne Wien [19]. She stated that if game platforms do not self-regulate appropriately, politics need to take over to ensure that the community is appropriately protected.

The creator of Rape Day stated that he was aware that Steam may delist the game, in which event he would distribute it through alternative avenues. In response to the ban, Desk Plant argued that the moral outcry on social media will only slow the process of normalization of sexual violence. He stated that the genre will become eventually socially accepted in video games comparing the behaviour to homicide in fiction, which, for a long time has been accepted. In the future, according to Desk Plant, historians will look back at visual novel games such as Rape Day and recognize it as a 'normal' game Thied [13].

Controversy

Given Valve Corporation [20] statement introducing virtual reality pornographic video games last year, allowing 'an entire range of controversial topics', the decision to remove Rape Day from the Steam platform received a multitude of comments and opinions. Many advocated for legitimacy of Rape Day and similar games and complained about the restriction of freedom and censorship. Others welcomed the decision to ban the game.

For example, comments indicated that 'with the sole focus' on rape the game is clearly inappropriate and oversteps natural boundaries. Others stated, 'nothing is illegal about this game, there is nothing wrong with this game for people to play... whether you agree with them or not, they should not have their voice taken away'. Another very explicit comment stated that 'sexual violence towards women IS the objective'. Some commentators noted that this particular game has been specifically targeted whereas other similar games can be downloaded on Steam Direct Guggisberg [16]. Justification for games such as Rape Day is expressed in the view that basic biology creates a specific platform for pornographic video games.

The argument of 'basic biology'

Biological explanations seem simplistic and neglect complex societal influences that make gender-based violence a contemporary issue Coates & Wade [21]. Sexual drive attributions indicate underlying beliefs that men's sexual urges cannot be controlled, and, therefore, sexual assault is 'natural' and a form of sexual release. Such perceptions of attributing sexual assault to a man's nature not only justify his violent behaviour, but also suggest that it is natural for all men to rape because of their biological urges. Furthermore, such attributions characterise all men as predators who deliberately and consistently seek sexual targets [20].

Indeed, some theorists proposed biologically based explanations for sexual assault. For example, Ellis [22] hypothesized that neurochemical exchanges in the brain result in some males' desensitization to environmental stimuli. As a result, reduced inhibition to negative consequences to sexually violent behaviour is experienced. However, it is important to note that no conclusive scientific evidence has been found to support this view Lussier & Mathesius [23].

It is fair to argue that video games where sexual assault is the explicit goal should never be allowed not only for moral reasons but because of evidence that players may be negatively influenced. In fact, some studies found that playing video games with sexually violent content is associated with a number of negative effects.

Negative effects

Several negative effects have been noted in the literature. Playing violent video games involving sexual violence do not seem harmless. Although, it is important to not fall into the trap of assuming a cause – effect relationship, there are many different factors that influence negative attitudes and beliefs about women. For example, Bareket [11] found that one such influence is the consumption of certain violent video games. Of course, sexist attitudes and behaviours do not have a simple single cause, such as playing video games; rather they are embedded in complex ways in every aspect of life.

Consuming violent video games depicting sexual violence has psychological and behavioural effects on the gamers and society as a whole. It reinforces gender stereotypes and power relationships by communicating that women are available sexual objects at the 'pleasure' of men; in the case of Rape Day—the women are targeted to be raped and murdered. In addition to the reinforcement of sexist attitudes, desensitization, rape myth acceptance, and sexual aggression are negative effects identified in the literature.

Reinforcement of sexist attitudes

There is a difference between gamifying sexual violence that objectifies women and reinforces sexism, and other violent content commonly present in video games Nagy [24]. A study by Gestos [4] in a systematic review of 22 studies examined the representation of women in video games. The study found high levels of objectifying content of hypersexualised female characters being 'mostly shown as subordinate to the male hero' and associated with sexist attitudes in real life.

Sexist attitudes shape societal conditions for females and males. Male dominance in contemporary society appears to be reinforced with video games in general, but particularly when violent games with sexual content come into focus. Male characters are almost always portrayed as displaying dominant behaviours, while female characters are displayed as being submissive and clearly non-dominant. Consequently, these games reinforce gender stereotypes. Taken a step further, games with sexualised content have been found to evoke hostile sexism due to a desensitization effect.

Desensitization

Scientific evidence suggests that playing violent video games can have a desensitization effect Gilbert & Daffern [25]; Nauert [26]. As a result, reduced empathy and sexually coercive and violent behaviours have been observed Fox & Potocki [27]. Likewise, Krahe [28] reported that playing violent video games and real-life aggressive behaviours were linked. In this regard, Bosson [29] referred to the emerging phenomenon 'young male avatar

syndrome' whereby men engage in unprovoked physical violence after playing violent video games. [28] argued that this behaviour may reflect gender norm conformity (dominance over females). In this regard, Fox & Tang [30] found that social dominance and conformity to some masculine norms (e.g., desire for power over women) predict sexist beliefs and hostility toward women and gaming.

Rape myth acceptance

Fox & Potocki [26], in a survey of 351 adult gamers found strong evidence of a relationship between violent video game playing, hostile sexism and rape myth acceptance. Likewise, a study by Beck and colleagues (2012) found a statistically significant link between rape-supportive attitudes and sexual violence video games.

Violent behaviours

Media psychology scholars examined the impact of violent video games in relation to increased aggressive behaviours. Negative game effects have been observed with genre-specific games involving coerced (non-consensual) sexual acts Holz Ivory [31]. Research participants were 553 adult males enrolled as fulltime students at a US university. The study found a statistically significant relationship on the role of gaming and inflicting harm to others in the form of sexual violence. Video game use may indeed be a predictor of sexual violence in that playing these games influencing such behaviours Holz Ivory [31]. If further research is able to predict sexual violence when games are played, policy makers may more readily engage in preventative measures.

Regulation

In Australia, the classification and ratings system for games were introduced in the 1990s in an attempt to provide information to gamers in relation to the nature, content and level of maturity required for video games (Brand et al., 2018). It was deemed that gamers are assisted in making an informed decision about games they wished to play. In relation to concerns about content, parents stated to be most concerned about sexual content and sexual behaviours in computer games.

Valve decided that Rape Day 'poses unknown costs and risks' despite earlier arguing that the responsibility for purchasing certain games lies with the consumer Guggisberg [16]; Webb [15] argued that the decision to remove the game from sales on the Steam platform demonstrated a sense of responsibility.

Regulating bodies struggle with allowing as much autonomy as possible while setting boundaries to protect society. For example, in Australia Guidelines for the Classification of Computer Games indicate that games will be restricted to those that do not depict 'actual sexual violence' or that 'incentives and rewards' are associated with sexual violence Guggisberg [16]. Many gamers advocated for legitimacy of Rape Day and openly complained about the restriction of freedom and censorship.

The examination of game payers' comments on the Steam platform, however, is also encouraging. It shows a shift in attitudes among (some) men. This is evident in statements approving Valve's

decision to distance the company from the game, even against the background of leniency in relation to pornographic content in the virtual reality gaming space [32,33].

Conclusion

This paper examined sexual violence depicted in video games using the example of the recent game called 'Rape Day' that caused international outrage. It discussed scientific evidence suggesting that game players' attitudes and even behaviours may be negatively affected, particularly in relation to sexual violence, even though no simple cause effect relationship should be assumed.

This analysis concludes that rape is a global social problem that should not be gamified. On the contrary, social norms that promote sexual violence in video games should continuously be challenged. In this regard, voicing concerns about games such as Rape Day on social media can be considered a form of bystander intervention. The global outrage about this video game demonstrates recognition of an increasingly promising area in sexual violence prevention. Whether or not fictional, sexual violence is a too serious topic to use as a game where players are enticed to rape women. The prevention of any form of sexual violence is an important goal for contemporary society. It is encouraging to learn that cultural change does happen, which is evidenced by the global social media mobilization and Valve's decision not to sell Rape Day on the Steam video game platform.

As social responses to sexual violence depicted in online games such as Rape Day continue to evolve, it is important to challenge stereotypes and rape myths. Technology regulation bodies will need to be continuously held accountable for depicting sexual violence in enforcing current policies or developing new ones in the name of community safety.

Research is still in its infancy and much more studies are needed to understand and problematize the gender-related double standards in violent video games, and their impacts on males, females and the general community. Emerging conversations that aim to eliminate rape culture and promote bystander intervention can mobilize communities into the online space where we socialise and play games for (appropriate) entertainment.

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