Girls and Assassin’s Creed

Veronique Bailey
Department of Interactive Media Design
National Taipei University of Technology
Taipei City, Taiwan

Abstract—Assassins Creed is one of the top selling video game franchises, as such it has a marked impact on the worldwide culture of gaming. As interaction designers we have to evaluate the impact that video games have on their users. One way that we can do this is by taking a more feminist approach; feminism naturally goes hand in hand with interaction design as it refers to fulfillment, identity, equity, empowerment and social justice. In this paper I evaluate the user satisfaction of female users as they play Assassin’s Creed (An Action Adventure game) in terms of evaluating their levels of fulfillment, identity, equity and empowerment.

Keywords—video games; assassin’s creed, feminist HCI; new media; user experience

I. INTRODUCTION

Feminism refers to the social and economic equality between both genders. Many HCI researchers and practitioners often advocate for the ‘user’, where the design should reflect the user’s designs, wants, and needs. Feminists have long since argued for polyvocality- that is allowing for multiple perspectives and varied voices to be heard [1]. We can see that feminism is a natural ally for interaction design. The six qualities of feminist interaction design introduced by Bardzell-pluralism, participation, advocacy, ecology, embodiment, self-disclosure can all be applied to the field of new media, in particular video games [2].

A. Feminism and Game Design

Prior concerns raised in Game design include but are not limited to the portrayal of female and male bodies in video games and virtual reality [1,4,5,10]. The usage of traditional male and female bodies implies that character design is influenced by the characterization and presentation of gender. However with 48% of gamers being female, but only 22% of game developers [14], we must ensure that the needs of the user are being met.

B. Women as Tropes in Game Design

Female characters in video games have the double-edged sword of having their stories, or their bodies used to further the arc of the male protagonist. One trope is the ‘damsel in distress’ [17] where the female character is presented as being helpless, and in need of saving. A variant of this trope is where the death or rape of a female character first occurs, and now the male protagonist has to avenge her. These tropes can be damaging to both genders as they remove the autonomy of the female character, which can be damaging to the psyche of male and female gamers [7,11].

C. Assassin’s Creed

One of the highest selling game series Assassin’s Creed, has a game called Assassin’s Creed III: Liberation which features the series’ first female protagonist, Aveline de Grandpre. This has lead gamers to ask why Assassin’s Creed: Unity doesn’t have any female playable characters in cooperative mode. To which Ubisoft creative director Alex Amancio told Polygon that “It’s double the animations, it’s double the voices, all that stuff and double the visual assets. Especially because we have customizable assassins. It was really a lot of extra production work” He went on to further say that the process of creating female avatars would require 8,000 extra animations. This statement lead Jonathan Cooper, the animation director on Assassin’s Creed III to respond on twitter and say that “In my educated opinion, I would estimate this to be a day or two’s work. Not a replacement of 8000 animations”[6].

The reason the Assassin’s Creed series was chosen was because it’s one of the few very popular games that has featured a female protagonist within its series. Currently Liberation has a 6/10 satisfaction rating [5] on Gamespot and Unity a 7/10 rating [9] based on reviews from Gamespot. With the storyline and gameplay being very similar, and the protagonists of both games being given similar abilities, what determines the difference between the level of enjoyment?

E. Relevant Works

Gameplay refers to the overall experience of playing a video game not including factors such as graphics and sound. An important factor in measuring enjoyment of a game is how the game makes the player feel about himself or herself not just how the player feels about the game. There are many different player engagement questionnaires designed to measure the different factors that can lead to players feeling satisfied during play. Three of the more prominent ones are the Gaming Engagement Questionnaire (GEQ) X, Immersive Experience Questionnaire (IEQ) X, and the Player Experience of Needs Satisfaction questionnaire (PENS) X. Weighing all three against each other, it was decided to use the GEQ which is weighed on a five point system. This questionnaire was chosen as it allows for a measure of the gamers’ satisfaction at all points of gameplay.
Implicit attitudes are actions or judgments that are under automatically activated judgment that happens without the person’s awareness of it. The Implicit Association Test was used in this experiment was used as it’s an effective tool for measuring social associative structures. The Implicit Association Test (IAT) measures attitudes and beliefs that people may be unwilling or unable to report as it measures the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., black people, gay people) and evaluations (e.g., good, bad) or stereotypes (e.g., athletic, clumsy). This is done to generate user data, and to determine whether or not the users have any pre-existing gender bias.

II. METHODOLOGY

An initial sample of six participants was used to determine how they felt towards the game. The participants are ranged from senior high school graduates, university students, to full time workers; with an age range from 20-28. They were from different socioeconomic backgrounds from within and outside of Taiwan. They were recruited based on their level of interest in video games and action adventure games in particular, and range from casual to serious gamers.

A. Harvard Implicit Association Test

The Implicit Association Test (IAT)[15] measures attitudes and beliefs that people may be unwilling or unable to report as it measures the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., black people, gay people) and evaluations (e.g., good, bad) or stereotypes (e.g., athletic, clumsy).

B. Gaming Engagement Questionnaire (GEQ)

The GEQ [12] is split up into three sections; core, social presence, and post game modules.

C. Talk through

The aim of this part of the experiment was to ask the participants to describe what they felt as they game was being played, in order to get a more in depth response.

Experiment description
The goal of this study was to understand if the ability to relate to the playable character’s gender/ethnicity increases the gameplay satisfaction for the user.

Game system and controller
Unity was played on a PS4 and Liberation was played using either a keyboard or a controller on a PC system depending on the participants’ level of comfort.

Training
The participants were given 5 minutes prior to starting the game to familiarize themselves with the controller and moving the character around. If they were able to complete the introductory mission they would be able to navigate well throughout the game.

Procedure
The participants were asked to play Assassin’s Creed Unity and Liberation for 30 minutes each. Before playing the games the participants were asked to complete the Implicit Association test. After playing the games they were asked to complete the GEQ. They were also asked to describe their feelings about the games before and after gameplay.

III. RESULTS

Our results are based on the data gathered on the 6 participants who completed the questionnaire for each game.

A. GEQ evaluation

| Component                          | Average (Unity) | Average (Liberation) |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Competence                         | 2.16            | 2.5                  |
| Sensory and Imaginative Immersion   | 2.33            | 2.16                 |
| Flow                               | 1.83            | 1.33                 |
| Tension/Annoyance                  | 2               | 1.8                  |
| Challenge                          | 2.33            | 1.83                 |
| Negative affect                    | 1.16            | 1.16                 |
| Positive affect                    | 2.67            | 2.67                 |

| Component                          | Average (Unity) | Average (Liberation) |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Competence                         | 1.53            | 2.46                 |
| Sensory and Imaginative Immersion   | 2.33            | 2.38                 |
| Flow                               | 2.53            | 2                    |
| Tension                            | 1.78            | 1.88                 |
| Challenge                          | 1.35            | 1.26                 |
| Negative affect                    | 2.25            | 2.5                  |
| Positive affect                    | 2.5             | 2.6                  |

| Component                          | Average (Unity) | Average (Liberation) |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Empathy                            | 1.05            | 2.94                 |
| Negative Feelings                  | 1.33            | 2.86                 |
| Behavioural Involvement            | 1.72            | 1.72                 |
coming up with new ways of designing. As an interaction designer, I hope that this research can help the community of HCI as well as the video game industry move forward in a new, more inclusive direction.

REFERENCES

[1] Adachi, P. J. C., & Willoughby, T. (2011). The effect of violent video games on aggression: Is it more than just the violence? Aggression and Violent Behavior, 16(1), 55–62. doi:10.1016/j.avb.2010.12.002

[2] Bardzell, S. (Indiana U. (2010). Feminist HCI : Taking Stock and Outlining an Agenda for Design. In Proceedings of the 28th International Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 1301–1310). doi:10.1145/1753326.1753521

[3] Bardzell, S., & Bardzell, J. (2011). Towards a feminist HCI methodology: Social science, feminism, and HCI. In Proceedings of the 2011 Annual Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI ’11) (pp. 675–684). doi:10.1145/1978942.1979041

[4] Beck, V. S., Boys, S., Rose, C., & Beck, E. (2012). Violence Against Women in Video Games: A Prequel or Sequel to Rape Myth Acceptance? Journal of Interpersonal Violence. doi:10.1177/0886260512441078

[5] Behm-Morawitz, E., & Mastro, D. (2009). The effects of the sexualization of female video game characters on gender stereotyping and female self-concept. Sex Roles, 61, 808–823. doi:10.1007/s11199-009-9683-8

[6] Conception, M. (2014, January 23). Assassin's Creed III: Liberation HD Review. Retrieved December 15, 2015, from http://www.gamecopet.com/reviews/assassin-s-creed-iii-liberation-hd-review/1900-6415643/

[7] Dill, K. E., & Thrill, K. P. (2008). Video Game Characters and the Socialization of Gender Roles: Young People ’ s Perceptions Mirror Sexist Media Depictions, 2009(2007), 851–864. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2009-11-009

[8] Farokhmanesh, M. (2014). Assassin's Creed tops Ubisoft's best selling franchises with 73M copies worldwide. Retrieved July 31, 2015, from http://www.polygon.com/2014/4/21/5636252/assassin-s-creed-best-selling-franchise-3-million-ubisoft

[9] Frank, A. (2015, November 12). HOW THE LEADING WOMEN OF ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE AND HALO 5 ARE CHANGING GAMES. Retrieved December 15, 2015, from http://www.polygon.com/features/2015/11/12/9722494/laura-bailey-victoria-atkin-interview-halo-5-assassins-creed-syndicate

[10] Fox, J., & Tang, W. Y. (2014). Sexism in online video games: The role of conformity to masculine norms and social dominance orientation. Computers in Human Behavior, 33, 314–320. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2013.07.014

[11] Jackson, L. A., von Eye, A., Fitzgerald, H. E., Zhao, Y., & Witt, E. A. (2010). Self-concept, self-esteem, gender, race and information technology use. Computers in Human Behavior, 26, 323–328. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2009.11.001

[12] J. H. Brockmyer, C. M. Fox, K. A. Curtiss, E. McBroom, K. M. Burkart, and J. N. Piadruzny, “The development of the game engagement questionnaire: A measure of engagement in video game-playing.” Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, vol. 45, no. 4, pp. 624–634, 2009.

[13] Kleeman, S. (2015, June 15). 5 Charts That Show Sexism Is Still Alive and Well in Gaming. Retrieved December 15, 2015.

[14] LoFGren, K. (2015, March 3). 2015 Video Game Statistics & Trends Who's Playing What & Why? Big Fish Blog. Retrieved July 31, 2016, from http://www.bigfishgames.com/blog/2015/global-video-game-stats-whos-playing-what-and-why/

[15] Project Implicit. (n.d.). Retrieved October 31, 2016, from https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicitStudy/?sid=1

[16] Stillman, D. (2015, April 07). Design Thinking for Services: Service Design Blueprint Tools - thedesigngym.com. Retrieved March 30, 2016, from http://www.thedesigngym.com/design-thinking-for-services-service-design-blueprint-tools/
[17] Sarkeesian, A. (2013, March 7). Damsel in Distress (Part 1) Tropes vs Women. Retrieved June 31, 2015, from https://feministfrequency.com/video/damsel-in-distress-part-1/

[18] Walton, M. (2014, November 11). Assassin's Creed Unity Review. Retrieved December 15, 2015, from http://www.gamespot.com/reviews/assassin-s-creed-unity-review/1900-6415948/