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Video games and gender-based violence

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Abstract

Gender-based violence is violence perpetrated against women, which is primarily or exclusively motivated by their sex, and includes both intimate partner abuse and physical or sexual assault by strangers. The aim of the present research was to investigate whether gender-based violence is depicted in the world of video games and whether video games contribute to the socialisation of young people in this regard. The methodology employed went beyond the administration of questionnaires to ascertain the perceptions of those who use video games or an analysis of the associated advertising, the habitual research strategies in this field. Rather, an analysis was conducted of the videogames themselves, examining their contents, dynamics and development, and the possibilities that they offer, etc., based on a "videographic analysis" of the variables explored. The results show that video games, which contain explicit incitements to violence, are widely available on the Internet, from the "anime", with various subgenres such as eroge and hentai, to the famous GTA, one of the best-selling video games worldwide, which contains a clear incitement to violence in the sense defined by the Comprehensive Law against Gender-Based Violence. The conclusion drawn from this research leads us to ask whether, as Amnesty International claims, we are in breach of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which requires States to take steps to remove such discrimination in all its manifestations.

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1. Gender-based violence and videogames

Gender-based violence is "violence perpetrated against women which is primarily or exclusively motivated by their gender", and includes both intimate partner abuse and physical or sexual assault by strangers. However, the

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Organic Law 1/2004 of December 28 on Integrated Protection Measures against Gender-Based Violence restricts the concept of gender-based violence to situations where, as a result of discrimination, inequality or the power that men hold over women, these are subjected to violence by past or present husbands or men with whom they have or have had similar affective relationships, even without cohabitation.

Thus, according to the Law against Gender-Based Violence, the concept of "gender-based violence" does not encompass video games in which there is a clear manifestation of discrimination, inequality or power held over women by husbands or other intimate male partners. This is largely because marital or intimate relationships are not frequently represented in video games: although affective relationships do appear in some video games, the contexts in which they occur clearly distinguish them from marital or intimate relationships. However, in the few games in which it can be inferred that this kind of relationship does exist, such as the social simulation game called "Sims", situations of "gender-based violence" in the legal sense are not represented, except in the case of the world-famous and controversial GTA (Grand Theft Auto), which has sold millions of copies and will be discussed later.

Nevertheless, if we understand the concept of "gender-based violence" as being violence perpetrated against women by virtue of being female, as is frequently argued by women's associations and movements, such violence is indeed represented repeatedly and systematically in the world of video games, as we shall see in this report.

It does not fall within the scope of this report to analyse the roots of violence against women, because as Puigvert, Redondo, Flecha and Sanmamed (2005) have indicated, in this field video games are contributing significantly towards disseminating gender-based violence through their representation of the desirable woman as one who corresponds to the ideal model of contemporary femininity and the desirable man as one who wields power through violence. Thus, young women also internalise violent values (Etxeberria, 2011) linked to a hegemonic model of masculinity which subsequently exerts an influence on their emotional and sexual relationships. In the study by clinical psychologist Linda Papadopoulou (2010) entitled *Sexualization of Young People: Review*, the author explains that women in video games are revered -and rewarded- for their physical attributes, encouraging male gamers to perceive women as being essentially hypersexual, with little reference to their intelligence or abilities, and promoting a mentality whereby women are viewed as subordinate and, therefore, as appropriate targets for sexual violence. The report stated that "the repeated depiction of men as dominant and aggressive and females as subordinate and demeaned is arguably perpetuating violence against women".

Linked to a patriarchal culture that legitimises male dominance, violence as a relationship strategy, submission and sexism, etc., these values generate a structural phenomenon that Galtung has called 'cultural violence', which is covertly transmitted in the socialisation process, and video games contribute to this. However, this aspect has already been discussed in a previous publication (Díez Gutiérrez, 2004) and will not be addressed here.

2. The first video games

The first commercial video game to centre its action around a form of gender-based violence such as rape, was *Custer's Revenge*. Produced by the *Mystique Company* in 1982, the action in this game is focused around the rape of a woman. Although the graphics are very basic, a reflection of the time in which it was created, it clearly depicts human characters who are sexually differentiated by their genitals. Gamers control the character of General Custer, represented by a naked man wearing no more than a cowboy hat, a scarf and boots and sporting a visible erection. Custer has to overcome several obstacles to achieve his goal, which is to rape a naked Indian woman with large breasts who is tied to a post or cactus and is called "Revenge". If the gamers successfully complete the first challenge, they can rape the bound Indian woman and will receive a score for each act of rape perpetrated. The game has no story or argument other than overcoming a volleys of arrows in order to commit rape, which is rewarded. The aim was to represent the "revenge" taken by this U.S. Army cavalry officer for a defeat by the Sioux Indians, through raping a female member of the opposing side (a relatively common event in modern warfare). This game "shows how violence against women, their human and legal rights and the horror of the rape are trivialised in macho imagery" (López Muñoz, 2010, 310). Complaints about the game lodged by groups of women human rights defenders were disregarded. On the contrary, about 80,000 copies of the game were sold, an extraordinary figure for the time.

Mystique sold the rights to their games to *Playaround*, which continued to sell *Custer's Revenge* under the name of *Westward Ho* for some time. Some changes were made to the game, such as darkening the woman's skin and making her extend her arm towards Custer, entreating him to leave, which extended the macho imagery and suggested that deep down, women want to be raped.

"This game prompted a long series of titles which, without openly declaring this among the game's goals, allowed players to commit brutal or humiliating actions - or both - against female characters" (López Muñoz, 2010, 311)

3. Violence against women

Thus, for example, *Phantasmagoria*, a 1995 horror adventure game written and designed by designer Roberta Williams, included a rape scene. *Slaves of the red mansion* is a game where girls are sold into sexual slavery and bound with chains. In *Fear Effect*, one of the characters is raped by tentacles. There are explicit rapes in *Knights of Xentar*. *Slap Dat* is presented with the following line: "If you're the kind of guy who likes to spank girls to get them horny, this is your game".

Studies by the Fundación Directa entitled *Keys to non-sexism in software development* (2007) or the Andalusian Institute for Women, led by Bertomeu (2005), indicate that this type of game is common on the Internet: The plot of the game *Slap the whore* is based on bludgeoning old rock stars - usually older women who were once famous - to death. In *Slap the booty*, gamers must hit the buttocks of a girl, who screams in pain each time. A clock measures the speed with which she is slapped. In *Sim Girl*, a girl asks to be beaten. Gamers hit her while she tells them how she should be beaten and when she is most vulnerable.

3.1. Anime video games

But it is perhaps the video games known generically as "anime", with various sub-genres such as *ero* and *hentai* (terms used for manga and anime with pornographic content; *hentai* means "perverted" in Japanese) which most obviously focus on gender-based violence; as the Mexican journalist Lydia Cacho has indicated, "in *hentai*, sexual violence against girls and women is the central theme" (2009).

The *bishōjo* sub-genre of pornographic video games are often categorised as "*hentai* games" in the West; however, this term is not usually employed in the Japanese language. In Japan, they are normally called *ero*-games, or *ero*. Women are depicted in these games as children (or at least, they display the physical proportions and behaviour of children), eternal adolescents who never age and have huge eyes which give them the appearance of being childlike and naive. The video game scenes allow players to dress girls according to over-sexualised adolescent male fantasies. Thus, education scenes in these games allow players to dress girls in school uniform, while in fantasy scenes, players can dress them as anything from witches to princesses to fairies or "catgirls", and when the scene is set in a restaurant, as in the game *Pia Carrot*, for example, girls can be dressed in elaborate waitresses' uniforms. The female characters in these types of video game frequently act like as girls. Their voices are usually high-pitched, and they are depicted as being easily frustrated and subject to throwing tantrums, displaying a supposedly "childish temperament". These models project an image which is markedly sexual and behaviour which is dependent on and submissive towards the gamer.

In most *bishōjo* video games, girls are represented by anime style cartoons rather than by pictures of real girls. This allows the game developers to circumvent Japanese child pornography laws, which do not prohibit the simulated representation of characters who appear to be under 18 years old. For example, one of the games released by Enix in 1983, *Lolita Syndrome*, comprised five mini games which presented stylised drawings of girls who appeared to be about ten years old, and one of these mini games consisted of throwing knives at one of these girls in order to remove their clothes. Nevertheless, it is common to find a disclaimer on the video game covers stating that all the characters are older than 18.

Japanese law "permits the representation of the genitals of boys or girls because they are not yet sexually mature - it would appear that paedophilia is exempt from censure. It is these and other stipulations in the law that have marked the trajectory of *hentai* to date, always remaining within the letter of the law. The Internet is full of

examples of how this has been achieved. Instead of penises, the cartoons and animations depict various monsters with tentacles (...) The result is a composition in which a monster with multiple limbs appears, penetrating all of the girl's orifices" (López Muñoz, 2010, 314).

Since *bishōjo* video games mainly depict female characters, the market is composed almost entirely of men. This industry has sought to expand its market by creating games aimed at girls which depict attractive young male characters, where the central theme is to link young men in homosexual relationships. Nonetheless, the female population represents only a very small part of the market in this industry.

Although male characters are not uncommon, they occupy less screen time in the video games and the character that represents the gamer almost never appears; furthermore, when this does happen, the character's face is usually off screen or otherwise hidden. Sometimes, the only time a male character appears is in sex scenes, as a penis entering from the side of the screen, or without any visible part, in what is commonly called the "invisible penis syndrome". In *bishōjo* games, the male characters often embody two common archetypes representing the gamer: the mean-spirited male chauvinist or the puny, lovelorn character, both of whom achieve the "adoration" of women in the game. It could thus be said that gender-based violence is represented at the core of the sexual relationships on which this type of video game is focused. The model of control, dependence, submission and "adoration" that they reproduce is an explicit and "normalised" form of gender-based violence which tends to construct a deeply sexist and patriarchal stereotype in this type of video game. As stated by López Muñoz (2010, 315), "concealed behind the exaggerated fetishism of violent sex in *hentai* is the male need to regain control over women, while at the same time they serve as a channel to satisfy macho fantasies".

Another sub-genre of "anime" consists of *raising simulation* games. In this sub-genre, the goal is to "raise" a female character, training and educating her to enhance her attributes (usually quantified numerically). A classic example is *Wonder Project J2*, featuring an orphaned robot girl. Many *ero* games start from this premise, where the character to be "developed" is usually some sort of sex slave.

3.2. *RapeLay*

In 2006, a Japanese company - *Illusion Software* - marketed a series of anime-type games, including one which achieved particularly widespread notoriety entitled *RapeLay*. In this game, the main character is a rapist who has recently escaped from prison and returns to wreak his revenge by raping as many women as possible, including a schoolgirl and a ten year old girl, and "making them enjoy" the experience. It is an interactive role-playing game where the gamer assumes the role of the main character, a rapist, and chooses the kinds of aggression to perpetrate. In order to take revenge on an adolescent who had reported him for the attempted rape of a friend, the main character decides to abuse her, her mother and her 12 year old sister. *RapeLay* also includes sexual attacks on women and girls on a train, as well as gang rapes. There are various options in the game, such as being able to select any part of the body, to strip women naked on a train or in a park, remove their clothing, sexually abuse them with a virtual hand, force their submission by using certain objects (handcuffs, for example) and choose the form of rape. While the female characters scream, a menu appears enabling the gamer to select the form of rape to perpetrate: "vaginal insert", "oral sex or"Take off pants". The "risk" that the protagonist runs is that victims can become pregnant as the number of rapes increases. In such cases, if the gamer successfully advances through the levels, the rapist must force them to abort and then turn them into his sex slaves, otherwise the possibility increases that the adolescent will stab him to death and thus end the game.

The degree of sexual violence that the game transmits is extreme. The higher the number of attacks and virtual abuses, the better the gamer's level. Amazon, a multinational in internet sales, presented the game as follows: "(...) You are a public enemy and you escaped from prison in search of new targets. This time, you meet a single mother and her two daughters. You quickly begin your hunt and capture each woman, one by one. The game includes a fun training system for learning how to break each of your targets as you wish".

In their condemnation of the game, the European Women's Lobby (EWL) stated that "The *RapeLay* game promotes a hostile attitude towards women, girls and male sexuality, and enforces and promotes harmful and discriminatory gender stereotypes. (...) The EWL cannot regard this as a question of freedom of expression, but as the banalisation and promotion of sexual assault". The distributor of *RapeLay* replied that "the game was approved

by Japanese regulations and we will not accept this kind of criticism from groups located on the other side of the world".

4. Controversy sells: Grand Theft Auto

As *Amnesty International* has been denouncing for years (2004), and as continues to be the usual pattern, in the different versions of the popular and controversial series *GRAND THEFT AUTO* (GTA), women working as prostitutes are subject to assault and murder.

In the *San Andreas* version, gamers can steal a car, drive around any of the streets in their city (finding prostitutes in virtually all of them), pull up beside a woman who engages in prostitution and avail themselves of her services.

Whilst it is true that in this game the gamers can choose to seduce a woman instead of paying for the services of a prostitute, this former option is more difficult to achieve since it requires intensive manipulation of the analogue stick. Prostitution, on the other hand, is the easiest option, and gamers can choose between three options: masturbation, fellatio or intercourse.

Furthermore, once the act has concluded and the money has been paid, gamers can recoup their money by assaulting or even killing the woman. Equally significant in a game in which rewarding violence with money is a regular feature, is the fact that one of the highest cash rewards is obtained by gamers after killing one of the women prostitutes who are walking through their neighbourhood. This is explicitly stated in the guide to the *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* version of the game: "While the woman is giving you a "good job", you gain life points but your money reserves go down. But if you want to recover the money you've spent, or even gain more, kill the girl as soon as you get out of your car..." In addition to this injurious treatment of women, the guide openly recommends that gamers kill women in order to steal the money that they are carrying.

This is the only video game which contains a form of incitement to violence against women in the legal sense as defined by the Law against Gender-Based Violence, because in one of the sections, when discussing the game's characters, Carl's girlfriends are mentioned and advice is given on how to treat girlfriends and prostitute them: "From now on you will have to build a relationship with Denise, so that she stops being "a pain in the neck" over the telephone. Spend some time going over to her house and taking her out in the neighbourhood. Sometimes she'll want to do a drive-by and shoot people, or go for a drink. Not to worry, messages at the bottom of the screen will always let you know if she likes this or not. Sometimes it'll be enough just to take her somewhere like the neighbourhood bar, but other times you'll need to fill her fun bar all the way to the top by letting her shoot members of other bands, or by putting your foot down on the accelerator of the car...". "Always try to find her in the evenings, because she'll be busy in the mornings. When you've got her in the palm of your hand, she'll give you the opportunity to go over to her house for "coffee"; if you accept her invitation, you'll triumph that night. As you progress in the relationship with your girlfriend, she'll lend you her car or will give you presents, such as the "pimp" suit that will appear in your wardrobe". By giving you this "pimp" suit, the girl is hinting to you that you become her pimp. It is at this point in the game when explicit sex scenes are depicted; if you have "won her over and she invites you in for coffee", this is a sign that you will succeed. However, for this you must download a small plug-in (module) that when activated displays the censored scenes. *The Missions* section on page 55 explains how to become a professional pimp and outlines the advantages. It states: "If you complete the proposed game and achieve "pimp" status, the girls won't charge you for their services; in fact, they'll pay you for them!" (Bertomeu, 2005; Fundación Directa, 2007).

5. Video games on the Internet available for free download

In video games available for free download on the Internet, such as *BENKI KUOSUKO*, the abuse of women even includes torture. In this game, a gagged, handcuffed and practically naked Japanese woman is sitting on a toilet with her legs spread apart. The gamer, encouraged by the phrase "you have to make this Japanese woman experience pleasure with all sorts of contraptions", can insert syringes, eggs, a jar of milk or pills into her vagina

and anus. Abuse, torture and rape are presented as a fun game starring the gamer, who is ordered to "make this woman experience pleasure". Despite having also been condemned by Amnesty International (2004) several years ago, the game can still be accessed at: <http://www.quepunto.com/juegosflash-benki-kousoko-juegosgratis/jugar-3013-minijuegos-eroticos-sexo-flash.html>. The website informs visitors about how many times the game has been played in the current month (15,780).

Amnesty International has also denounced the game called *SOCIOLOTRON*, a multi-player role-play game that can currently be found on the Internet (<http://www.sociolotron.com/>). The game is defined as being "against sexual taboos" and its plot includes the rape of women and sexual slavery with consequences such as sexually transmitted diseases and forced pregnancies.

"Cho chabudai Gaeshi" is a Japanese video game developed by Taito which simulates "domestic violence" (*sic*). Gamers take the role of a father who is apparently frustrated by the attitude of his offspring: after repeatedly hitting a dining table recently set for dinner by a submissive woman, at which all members of the family are sitting, the father must hurl the table into the air in a furious rage in order to cause the maximum possible damage. The harder gamers hit the table, the more points are scored. If in addition to hitting the table, the gamer overturns it violently, he or she is awarded a large number of points and is told how far the table has been thrown.

6. Games against gender-based violence

A Danish organisation against gender-based violence has launched a video game that is available for free activation on the Internet and which attempts to draw attention to this issue by inviting the user to strike an adolescent girl. The gamer can hit her again and again until her face is bruised, even to the point of knocking her to the ground with punches. This controversial campaign against gender-based violence was called *Hit the Bitch*, and consists of a video game aimed at showing that gender-based violence is degrading. The game recreates the exact scene which should be avoided, and then condemns the gamers themselves for their attitudes. Gamers hit a woman, and the more they beat her, the more points they obtain, making the gamer stronger the more he or she strikes the woman. Encouraging gamers to beat a woman, albeit in a video game simulation, is a peculiar way of communicating that gender-based violence is wrong. When the young woman is eventually knocked to the floor and the game finishes, a message in Danish appears which says: "Now you are 100% macho. 100% idiot. And now what?". The message goes on to say that there is no excuse that can justify the abuse of women and urges gamers to seek psychological help.

The game, the use of which has been restricted outside Denmark, was posted on the Internet by the NGO known as *Born og Unge I Voldsramte familier*, which fights to defend the rights of children who are abused within their families. "Dear non-Danish visitor, Due to the extremely high number of visits to *Hit the bitch*, access has been restricted to Danish users", says the message on the blocked page. The game has received much criticism because it seems more of an incitement to violence than a criticism.

7. Conclusion

Ultimately, we have to ask whether, as Amnesty International has claimed, "the Spanish State is in breach of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which requires steps to be taken to eliminate such discrimination in all its manifestations". And not only the Spanish state, but the European Union and those countries that have signed innumerable conventions, declarations and regulations aimed at the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women but which allow the profits of multinational video game companies to constitute the criterion that guides the production and dissemination of this type of game.

This is a social issue, not something linked to the private decisions of those individuals who "consume" video games or the people responsible for them (usually families). Responsibility comes before the market, before these products reach the market. Many structural and social problems are currently being silenced in public and political discussion, and this is one of them. Attempts are made to invoke individual choice and the consumer's right to freedom of choice, as if stopping people playing video games were somehow related to these issues. Meanwhile,

what is effaced from social debate is what kind of content and values these video games promote (Díez Gutiérrez, 2009).

"Commercial values or profit carry more weight than human rights, peace or justice. For ethical reasons, these games should not be manufactured or sold, but economic interests prevail over other interests" (Fernández, 2003). The market has become a major regulator of consumption, on the basis of supply and demand and, especially, of the profits obtained. It is the individual subject who has to decide what is good and what is bad. We have moved from social regulation to a "free market" situation. Furthermore, in the case of children, the responsibility for deciding what their children do and do not consume is generally felt to rest solely with their parents. This means that socialisation is essentially being directed by the market, while families are often held responsible for the ferocious conditions imposed by our contemporary god: the global market.

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