Sex Sells: An analysis of how sex really sells in video games.

Brad Seaberg

Measuring 34 - 24 - 35 and weighing 130 lb, is it any wonder the 5’9’’ brown eyed brunette is considered a goddess by many? Her sleek textured appearance, agile movements, adventurous appeal, and two big guns are highly attractive qualities. (If you hadn’t already determined, I speak of Lara Croft.) Nearly everyone has heard of the star of the Tomb Raider series, but does anyone know who Steve Russell is? Or perhaps Nolan Bushnell and Al Alcom are more familiar. Russell was the man responsible for Spacewars, Bushnell for Atari and Alcom for Pong. The history of video games is not very well known, but memorable characters such as Lara Croft are quite famous. Currently, video games are most celebrated and recognized for their violence. Although violence dominates the pastime, sexual content is making a break through.

Whereas Bushnell and Atari did wonders for the video game industry, one company seems to have pioneered sexual content in video games. That company was known as Mystique. Most note worthy of their games is Custer’s Revenge, but two lesser known titles they released the same year were Bachelor Party and Beat 'em & Eat 'em. The year was 1982 and the premise of a video game rating system was nonexistent, yet Mystique labeled clearly “Adult Video Game” on their products.

Designed for the Atari 2600 each game had its own unique sexual game play. In Bachelor Party, the player moves a peg of Spanish Fly in a fashion similar to the platform in Breakout. The “ball” of this game is the man and the “bricks” are women. The purpose of the game is to score by ricocheting the man of the Spanish Fly and into the women. It is somewhat difficult to see all this detail on an Atari 2600 game, but it is apparent that a phallic appendage grows larger before the man scores. In Beat ‘em & Eat ’em the player controls two naked women who run back and forth at the base of a building trying to catch semen from a stranger who is masturbating off the roof; the manual claims this stranger “could have been a famous doctor or lawyer.” After completing a level, the player is rewarded with the image of the naked women licking their lips. Finally, in Custer’s Revenge we revisit the battle of Little Big Horn. However, there is no fighting. The player must simply dodge a hail of arrows to have sex with a naked woman tied to a cactus (seen below courtesy of Atari Age). Custer himself looks like a pinkish man with a phallic line jetting out. The maidens look somewhat like a pointy backwards capitol “P.” The game itself offers high levels of difficulty mainly because of the slow reaction and seemingly random cactus obstacles. The manual to Custer’s Revenge even offers advice should your children catch you playing, “If the kids catch you and should ask, tell them Custer and the maidens are dancing.”

It often takes a great deal of creativity to make a video game. In the case of Bachelor party by Mystique, this seemed lacking. However, Beat ‘em & Eat ’em is highly imaginative. After all, it is a well-known fact that no matter how much semen a woman should swallow she will not become pregnant with a lawyer or doctor. “I suppose we shouldn't expect the designers of a game about a penis with a head stroking itself to be geniuses, but what happens when they settle down with their Beat 'em and Eat 'em royalties and want to have children? ‘You're still not pregnant, honey? Are you even eating the sperm I'm squirting off the roof?’” (SeanBaby). Custer’s revenge on the other hand seems to be a satire of the infamous battle of Little Bighorn, and has often been thought of as a game where a white man rapes Indian women in the midst of battle. I am sure that was not the intent, however.
Now let's move to 1992, the year Night Trap was released for the Sega CD. This was very first game that used the FMV (full-motion video) technology with live actors. The game contained no nudity or particularly gory scenes, yet it was considered one of the first games to have mature content. The game follows a party of five girls at a lakeside house. Previously five girls disappeared from this house. It is the player’s job to make sure these five do not die, and no one becomes aware of his presence. The house itself is home to several vampires who have set traps around the house to catch the women. The player must set the traps at the right time to catch the vampires. The game plays like an interactive movie, and ends immediately if the player fails and a girl is caught or makes his presence known. Although not initially popular, due to political controversies over violence and mature content (it was erroneously believed that the objective was to stalk, torture, rape and murder five women) in video games, this game is considered to be one of the great sleeper hits.

I have played Night Trap, and I found the game to be entertaining, if not aggravating and complicated. It is hard to keep track of each of the five girls all at once and to switch from one remote location to trigger a trap and then return to another to get necessary information in such a limited time frame. I didn’t mind loosing, however. The cut scenes when the player fails normally involved a girl being caught by the vampires and then a team of Navy Seal-like soldiers breaking into the house to rescue everyone. I know I spent many hours on that game, though I never beat it.

1992 also saw the release of Cho Aniki (also know as Ch Eniki and Choaniki and developed by Global A Entertainment). This game was only released in Japan, and has seen a whole series develop that currently includes a Playstation 2 title. Cho Aniki was similar to Gradius, R-Type, and other side scrolling space shooters. However, there was an element of homoeroticism in this game. In the original the player is a flying man in a speedo that fires lasers out of his viking hat. He is then transported to an alternate dimension where he and his two naked assistants must fight hordes of chariots filled with naked men and giant erotic monstrosities.

In 1994, a self-regulatory body for the interactive entertainment software industry was established. Known then as the Interactive Digital Software Association (IDSA), it has since become the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). Before then video games were made and shipped with little or no information of the actual game content. Now the ESRB has a formal rating system (EC, E, T, M, AO), similar to the rating system used by the Motion Picture Association (MPA). All videogames are required to be submitted to the ESRB before they are available for purchase, so that they may be rated appropriately. No commercially licensed game to receive an AO (Adults Only) rating has been successful. On the other hand, some of the most popular games to date are rated M (Mature). The distinction is as follows:

**MATURE:**

Titles rated **M - Mature** have content that may be suitable for persons ages 17 and older. Titles in this category may contain mature sexual themes, more intense violence and/or strong language.

**ADULTS ONLY:**

Titles rated **AO - Adults Only** have content suitable only for adults. Titles in this category may include graphic depictions of sex and/or violence. Adult Only products are not intended for persons under the age of 18. (ESRB)

(Note: A full listing of content descriptors pertaining to these ratings can be found at the following website [http://www.esrb.org/esrbratings_guide.asp](http://www.esrb.org/esrbratings_guide.asp).)
To put this distinction into perspective, let’s look at one game series in particular: Leisure Suit Larry rated M. In this series, the player takes on the role of Larry, a virgin disco swinger, and attempts to have sex. The games were released for the computer, and contain carry severe sexual themes, but only brief nudity. If and when the player succeeds at his quest the player does see Larry have sex; however, the graphics are very poor and the game seems to merely imply the act than graphically depict it.

Shortly after the establishment of the ESRB, in 1994 another sex themed game was released on the 3DO. Plumbers Don’t Wear Ties, published by Krinn Entertainment, carried the Adults Only rating and was virtually an interactive pornographic. Using full motion video similar to those in Night Trap, Plumbers Don’t Wear Ties captivates its player by trying to improve the sex life of a plumber. The game was very graphic and short-lived.

Another shining example in recent years came during the third quarter of 2002. Dave Mira’s BMX XXX and Dead or Alive Extreme Beach Volleyball were being previewed, and both caused quite the stir. So much so, in fact, that Dave Mira dropped off the label and Acclaim released a separate game for his franchise. BMX XXX was then released in the fourth quarter, as was DOA Extreme Beach Volleyball. BMX XXX was rated AO, while DOA was rated M. The latter is still a huge success. The premise behind both games is clear, sex and sports, but it is not quite that simple. In BMX XXX the player can play as a half naked woman (or select from several clothed characters) who performs bicycle tricks for points. These points can then be spent in strip clubs or to unlock special features. In DOA the player owns an island and invites many sexy co-eds to his tropical paradise for fun in the sun, namely volleyball. Similar to the digi-pet fad of the late nineties, the player raises one of the ladies to be the best volleyball player. The game is fairly involved for such a simple concept. However, the true appeal of the game is the stunning graphics, as evident in the image above, courtesy of Tecmogames.com.

There have also been many pleas for nude cheat codes, and game designers have given their audience what they want. Most notably was the Spice Girls video game Spice World (rated E) released in 1998. This game was released with 6-10 year old girls as the target audience, but it also contained a cheat that allowed one to see all the Spice Girls naked on the title screen.

Similar to cheats are mods. Mods are patches that are installed over a computer game to change the game play. The Tomb Raider series, released exclusively for Playstation in 1996, quickly amassed a following. The game had excellent graphics for its time, very involved and puzzling game play, and Lara Croft. Lara Croft pioneered the sexy heroine role of video games. Fans wanted to see her naked, but Eidos said no. When the games were finally released for computer it did not take long for nude mods to be created by fans. Furthermore, there are nude mods for many older games that can be found as roms on the internet. (Roms are video game files that a program called an emulator can play on a computer).

Although I have never been a fan of the Tomb Raider Series, there has to be something said for Eidos, the company who created her. They have sold millions of games worldwide, spawned to feature films from the series, and one cannot visit a video game expo without seeing a Lara Croft model. She is as popular as Mario, and attractive as well.

It seems evident by such a history that sexual content in video games has an audience. From characters such as the extremely voluptuous and bouncy Mai, of the King of Fighter series, to the sexy and animated lesbian heroines of Fear Effect 2: Retro Helix, it is clear that there are developers who recognize this. Indeed, over recent years the demand has increased and many players have satisfied their desire by modifying the games for themselves. With the onset of the ESRB it is easy to understand how much sexual content is socially acceptable (recall the subtle difference between M and AO ratings), and such material can be limited to those who are mature enough to deal with such themes. If there is any true problem with sexual content in video games it lies similarly with violence: the lack of enforcement of video game ratings by both distributors and consumers.
References


