Video games make you less sexist? It's not quite that simple

May 4 2015, by Michael Kasumovic

One narrowly defined study isn't enough to prove that people who play video games are less sexist. Credit: JD Hancock/Flickr, CC BY

The latest article exploring sexism in academia suggests that it no longer exists. Some have already grumbled about flaws in the study's design. But more than that, I simply don't believe the finding because there is clear evidence that sexism still exists.

I've also recently heard numerous times via Twitter that playing video games makes you less sexist. But I don't believe that finding either.

This isn't because either study is poorly designed, or because the samples are biased, or even that the researchers had ulterior motives. I don't believe either of these studies because no explanation in biology is that simple. Especially when it comes to humans.

Our desire for answers to fall into simplified categories is leading to a more fundamental problem: it's fuelling the segregation of ideas and breeding public distrust in scientists. And this is bad for everyone.

Research supports my opinion

With the internet at our fingertips, it is not hard to hunt down a piece of research that will support our worldview.

Arguing with someone about how video games make you sexist? Cite this paper, or this one or even bring up this paper. Trying to convince someone that video games *don't* make you sexist? No problem! Cite this new paper, because surely the most recent research must be most correct.

Then when the articles you cite fail to convince your opponent, you can get down to the nitty-gritty and argue about sample size and experimental design, citing superior knowledge of statistics (this is an argument I commonly receive).

But neither improved statistics nor a doubling of sample size will improve the quality of the questions asked. Let's take a simple everyday example.

If I leave milk on my front stoop overnight in Sydney during the summer, it'll spoil before the next morning. We might thus conclude that not refrigerating milk results in spoiling. But that's not entirely accurate, because if I did the same in Toronto in the winter, the milk would be

fine (or maybe even freeze).

It's not the lack of refrigeration that resulted in the milk spoiling, but the fact that it was not kept at the proper temperature. At a certain point, oversimplifying ideas results in the loss of the crux of the problem and a focus on the refrigerator rather than the temperature.

Are gamers really more sexist?

Women are often represented in an overly sexualised manner in video games. But does that make gamers more sexist? Credit: Square Enix

Let's jump back to the video game paper for a minute. The question the researchers asked is whether playing video games over the long term can affect sexist attitudes.

The argument is that because female characters are underrepresented, and both sexes are overly sexualized in videogames, these factors can

interact to normalise [sexist views](#). This hypothesis was previously supported in [short](#) and [long-term](#) studies.

In this recent study, the researchers used 824 German adolescents to explore whether continued exposure to video games can affect sexist attitudes over the long term. The participants provided information on how often they played video games, and answered a questionnaire on their sexist attitudes. Three years later, they asked the same students the same questions.

The authors found that individuals that spent more time playing video games were less sexist. I've had this result mentioned to me several times. Interestingly, the part of the paper where the authors admit that the effect size was tiny (meaning that the likelihood that this has a real-world effect is low) is never highlighted.

Does this result trump all the earlier research (experimental or correlative) that shows that video games can reinforce sexist attitudes? No. What it does do is muddy the waters, demonstrating that the association is not that simple.

But, rather than focusing on the result, we should refocus our attention on the question. If we think about it more closely, the authors are not asking whether video games make adolescents sexist, they're asking something completely different.

They're asking whether [playing video games](#) affects the sexist attitudes adolescents openly admit to having. And that the video games have more influence on their attitudes than their daily interactions with parents, teachers, friends and peers. Except that they ignored any of these social factors by not including them in the study.

The idea that video games alone can make you anything other than good

at "video game-like things" is rather silly. However, through their imagery and player agency, video games may be able to reinforce certain worldviews associated with aggression, dominance and sexism that stem from the social environment individuals occupy.

But that is a completely different and more complex question that the video game literature – and most others – largely does not examine.

Where should science go from here?

The problem of oversimplification is not limited to the [video game](#) literature or studies of human behaviour. It exists in any field where there is diversity and variation.

For example, there are papers showing resveratrol in wine is [good for you](#), while others show [no effect at all](#). Some papers show early morning risers are clearly [happier and more productive](#) than late risers, and others suggest maybe Ben Franklin was [wrong on that one](#).

Categorising complex ideas only serves to create cult-like tribes and promotes between-group misunderstanding and animosity. This needs to stop. And all of us need to play our part.

As researchers, it's fine to explore a question using correlations, as this helps to identify the factors that may be important. That's only a start, though. Those correlations should be used as a springboard for future experiments that build in greater complexity. It's irresponsible to leave correlation looking like causation, and we need to admit the complexity of the world we are exploring.

The media also needs to stop simplifying ideas and presenting them as being black and white. The average individual can understand a complex topic if explained properly. Journalists should strive to provide

information on previous studies if they're reporting new findings. Explaining changes in scientific thought will leave readers with more questions, only serving to whet their appetite for more science and research.

And it's up to readers to avoid hiding behind selected publications that [reinforce their worldviews](#). We can benefit from reading other perspectives, and when we do so, do it with an open mind. We should engage in discussion with individuals with opposing views, not just dive in to arguments and name calling, as this only serves to isolate ourselves from one another.

Once we can all admit that the world is more complex than we'd like to believe, we can finally get to exploring all the various facets that makes the world the wonderful and horrible place that it is.

So after reading [this paper](#), do I believe that video games make us less sexist? Nope. And I don't believe that they make us more sexist either. Nothing is quite that simple.

Michael Kasumovic is Evolutionary Biologist, ARC Future Fellow at UNSW Australia.

This story is published courtesy of [The Conversation](#) *(under Creative Commons-Attribution/No derivatives).*

Source: The Conversation