Student X

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Women and Video Games

Starting in 2013, writer and media critic Anita Sarkeesian began publishing online a video series called "Tropes vs Women in Video Games," which explored representations of women and girls in popular video games. Sarkeesian demonstrated that female characters, when they weren't absent altogether, were typically cast as sidekicks, damsels in distress, seductresses, or prizes for males. For her efforts, Sarkeesian was harassed and threatened both online and in person by a subgroup of gamers who objected to any "politically correct" critique of their pastime (Takahashi).

The uproar surrounding Sarkeesian's treatment, along with other high-profile scandals involving hostility towards women, exposed a deep, troubling strain of sexism in the world of video games. In response, the video game industry made efforts to hire more female developers and raise awareness of sexist depictions of women in games.

Unfortunately, these efforts have not been entirely successful. The number of female developers is still very low relative to males, and people who speak out against sexist games still encounter threats and hostility. Perhaps most troubling, plenty of video games still perpetuate negative stereotypes of women and even glorify violence against them (Iowa State University).

The persistence of the problem of sexism in video games begs the question of

what more should be done. Given the widespread popularity and influence of video games, this is an important question to answer if we are serious about advancing equality and improving safety and respect for women.

As a "gamer girl" myself, I understand that part of the problem is rooted in the choices made by the people who buy and play games. Video game companies will stop making sexist games only when the game-buying public rejects them. But this kind of widespread change in gamer attitudes and behavior is not easy to achieve. It must begin early and close to home. Parents, guardians, siblings and others who care about young gamers must guide them toward choices that may eventually have a lasting impact on game content.

According to one industry insider, the conversations Sarkeesian sparked "forced us to look at battles we thought we had already won" (Takahashi). That hard look showed that male game developers still vastly outnumbered females, as they had since the industry's inception. Industry leaders hoped that hiring more women would result in more games with stronger female representation.

And in recent years more women have indeed joined game development companies as a result of industry efforts to recruit them. Nevertheless, men still outnumber women three-to-one. In the most influential programming positions, there are nine males for every female (De Clercq). And in all eight of the major video game production companies, men serve as CEO (Kleeman). The industry so far has failed to prove that it can meaningfully change the balance of men to women in its ranks.

This failure may be due, at least in part, to an unwelcoming work environment. Once hired, women report lower salaries and a relative lack of opportunity and influence. Some experienced female game developers even discourage other women from entering the industry, warning them against starting their careers in a field where they would face hostility and find little room for advancement (Takahashi). Simply adding more female employees was never likely to fix the problem, so long as men were not themselves held responsible for changing corporate culture and game content.

Industry efforts thus far have not translated into video games free from harmful depictions of women. From "mature"-rated shooter games such as *Final Fantasy*, to adventure games such as *The Legend of Zelda*, to family fun games such as *Mario Kart*, female characters still are too often missing, objectified, stereotyped, secondary in importance, or helpless to save themselves without a male hero (Iowa State University).

A more thorough and lasting solution will require a shift in the behavior of gamers themselves. Gamers, after all, are the source of hostility directed toward those who complain about sexism. They're also the buyers and fans of games that perpetuate harmful depictions of women. Only when the majority of gamers reject games that feature negative stereotypes will the industry stop making them. It is not easy to change entrenched, long-standing attitudes, however, whether it's the anti-female hostility of a loud but small minority of gamers, or the passive acceptance of sexist games by the majority. The kind of deep-seated, widespread change in attitudes that can lead to meaningful changes in consumer behavior depends on family and friends taking responsibility for guiding the next generation of gamers.

My own experience playing video games demonstrates the impact such guidance can have. I've been an avid gamer most of my life. Like many game players, I bristle at sexist representations of women in games. Even so, I have begrudgingly tolerated them because I've wanted to keep playing the games available to me. I've been disappointed, even hurt, by the sexism in games I otherwise love. *The Legend of Zelda,* for example, is a beautiful, exciting game series that I've enjoyed for years. Unfortunately, to play the games you must assume the role of a brave, skillful male character whose goal is to rescue a mostly helpless princess. Enjoyable as it is, the game sends a signal about gender roles and power that can be disheartening to a girl.

I have found a way to reclaim some power for myself, however, by guiding my brother. In our time playing games together, I've helped him become more aware of the differences in how males and females are represented. For example, I've always rejected the hyper-feminine characters in *Mario Kart* -- "Princess Peach" or "Princess Daisy" -- in favor the gender-neutral characters such as "Yoshi." My brother, in turn, chooses gender-neutral characters, too. It makes the experience more fair and fun for both of us.

Growing up playing video games with his big sister, my brother has learned to make choices that respect women and girls. As he plays with his friends, these attitudes spread. In this way, as a new generation of game players matures, they may naturally prefer and even demand games that promote fairness and equality for everyone. In response, video game companies may someday change their products to satisfy the preferences of this new generation of customers.

Video games are so prominent in our culture that they have tremendous power to shape attitudes and behaviors. To the extent that they exclude females and reinforce harmful stereotypes, they work against the creation of a society in which men and women, boys and girls, are equally safe, empowered, and respected.

The video game industry, like any other, depends on its ability to sell products. This puts the power of change in the hands of the people who buy and play games. The fullest solution to the problem of sexism in video games, therefore, requires not just industry changes but also long-term changes in gamer values and behaviors.

Waiting for a new generation of gamers to mature, however, provides little comfort today for gamers who want to keep playing but who also resent the many harmful depictions of females found in the games they play. Until both players and makers evolve, individual gamers like myself face a difficult choice: At what point are we willing to stop spending our money and time on a pastime we love, but which doesn't love us back?

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Date

<div align="center">Universal Basic Income and Entrepreneurship</div>

The idea of a society providing all of its members with a guaranteed income has gained increasing consideration in recent years. Business and technology leaders are exploring universal basic income (UBI) as a hedge against predicted mass unemployment resulting from the automation of jobs. At the same time, reformers on both the right and left are interested in UBI as a possible alternative to traditional welfare programs.

Experiments with UBI are currently underway around the world, from Kenya and India to Canada and California. The findings from these experiments could be world-changing: If UBI turns out to be viable, it could cushion the impact of future social and economic upheaval for many millions of people.

The success or failure of UBI is tied to a question about human nature: Would the security and freedom resulting from a guaranteed income make people more inclined to create and be productive, or would it result in massive idleness and dependency? Whatever the answer to that question turns out to be, I argue that we should be training and equipping more people now to start their own businesses. Whether or not UBI succeeds, entrepreneurship offers at least a partial, perhaps a substantial, solution to the impending problems UBI is aimed at addressing.

Leaders at the top of U.S. business and technology -- Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, and others -- believe UBI might be unavoidable in coming decades (Lui; Vella). As artificial intelligence and robotics improve, not only will manufacturing jobs be taken over by machines, but also a host of white-collar occupations in law, medicine, finance, transportation, and other sectors. With a scarcity of jobs available for humans, UBI proponents believe that society eventually will have no choice but to subsidize its citizens. As a way to begin testing how such a program might work, business leaders in Silicon Valley are already conducting limited experiments with UBI in Stockton and Oakland, California (Crane; Vella).

UBI is also attracting attention from people who want to reform existing programs designed to relieve the effects of poverty and inequality. A three-year pilot study in Ontario, Canada, is providing 4000 people with $17,000 CAD per year. Reformers on both the right and left are interested to see whether UBI can not only relieve poverty but also save administrative costs and reduce welfare bureaucracies (Bergstein). Other UBI experiments are underway, or under consideration, in Kenya, India, the Netherlands, Italy, and Hawaii (Flowers; Vella).

One of the primary worries about UBI is that it would remove the incentive to work, leaving vast numbers of people unwilling to provide for themselves. According to Clyde Wayne Crews, Jr., writing in *Forbes* magazine, UBI threatens to "normalize paternalism and dependency on government" (1). In particular, according to this critique, UBI would dampen entrepreneurship, the very engine of economic productivity

that might both counter the impact of technological unemployment and reduce dependency on social support systems.

This critique reveals a central question about human nature that lies the heart of the UBI debate: Given a guaranteed income, what would most people do with it? Would they put it to productive use, investing in themselves and their communities? Or would they use it to slack off, content to be unproductive and dependent? The current and planned experiments may provide some insight into that question.

Whatever the experiments reveal, however, we should be taking measures now to promote more entrepreneurship. Though I disagree with his rationale, I believe Crews is right to lift up the ability of people to innovate and start new business ventures as at least a partial solution to both of the problems UBI is aimed at addressing.

If UBI does not turn out to be a workable policy, then encouraging entrepreneurship still seems a sensible response to an impending unemployment crisis. Studies show that an increase in entrepreneurship can reduce unemployment, as startups not only provide an income for their founders but also create new jobs for others. Indeed, according to research, "higher levels of entrepreneurial activity significantly lower subsequent unemployment levels" (Audretsch, et al 17), which means that encouraging entrepreneurship now may help preempt the expected future downturn in job opportunities.

On the other hand, if experiments show that UBI is indeed worth implementing, then programs promoting entrepreneurship will help more people find creative and productive ways to make use of their freed-up time and resources. Researchers backing

the Canadian experiment include starting new businesses on the list of new ventures UBI recipients are likely to try (Bergstein). Other UBI proponents believe providing for basic needs will spur productivity, including innovative new businesses that can generate jobs and economic growth (Flowers).

Crews and others who fear that UBI would dampen the entrepreneurial spirit doubt that people with a guaranteed income would be motivated to work. As Crews writes, "need rather than comfort drives and underlies human action and entrepreneurship" (5). But this view is not borne out by evidence. According to an international group of researchers, while some entrepreneurial activity arises from people who have no other employment options, far more comes from people who do (Audretsch, et al).

The latter certainly was the case with my own parents. They started a financial planning service more than two decades ago, and have run it successfully ever since, employing at times up to ten other people. Both my mother and father could have taken jobs with other companies when they got out of school, but they instead decided to risk running their own business so that they could control their own economic fate. By boosting opportunities for ambitious and independent people such as my parents, UBI may well lead to more rather than less economic initiative and innovation.

Entrepreneurial success is not a given; people starting their own businesses need time, know-how, and at least some resources. Programs promoting entrepreneurship might focus on education and training, seed money, mentoring, and networking. Many people with a guaranteed income at their disposal would welcome

help in starting and managing new ventures. No doubt many people faced with the prospect of a jobless future likewise would embrace assistance in building a business of their own.

If it is true that workers today face a future that may provide neither a reliable social safety net, nor dependable employment opportunities, then there is little wonder that people are taking a radical idea such as universal basic income seriously enough to invest in long-term experiments. Before a crisis truly hits, they hope that perhaps these experiments will help answer the long-standing question of whether the economic well-being and freedom of individuals is better served by government assistance, or by its absence.

Perhaps in the case of UBI this question pitting individual initiative against government assistance need not be so starkly drawn. There is no reason yet, at least, to rule out a policy that both subsidizes income and promotes activities that would put that subsidy to productive uses, including helping individuals start new businesses that can both relieve the impact of mass unemployment and reduce dependency on social supports.

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