

The Breast Effect

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Women have breasts. Boobs. Tits. Jubbies. Whatever the designation you prefer.

It stands to reason then that female game characters would have them as well. In this age of increasingly realistic game models and textures, the female form has been given what some might consider an overdose of attention during the design process. Male gamers have appreciated the extra attention for various reasons, and even female gamers can (albeit sometimes grudgingly) appreciate the added realism as realistic character movement can help add to the immersive quality of the game if it's used properly.

The fascination with video game breasts goes so far as to inspire articles such as this:

http://www.clubskill.com/Game_Specials/3514/Boob%20Physics

It's an article about how effective breast related physics have been used and evolved through the years. Games have become more realistic, and subsequently so have the movements of the often oversized breasts on female game characters. Newer gamers may not be able to remember a time when game character breasts did not jiggle upon jumping, or react to the character's motion as a whole, but this article helps chronicle how the now overwhelmingly present feature of 'boobie jiggle' was introduced into the world of video game design.

(A more realistic representation of 'boobie jiggle' can be found here:
<http://www.shockabsorber.co.uk/bounceometer/shock.html>)

So much attention focused on such a relatively simple body part possessed by more than half the world's population. We see breasts every day of our lives, often without any thought. They come in multiple shapes, sizes, colors and elasticity. There are young boobs, old boobs, white boobs, black boobs, and even the oft humorous 'man-boob'. While the majority of these don't tend to be included accurately in game design, instead favoring the eternally perky giganto-boobs prevalent in fighting games, the breast as a whole has managed to make a surprisingly large (pun somewhat intended) impact on the game industry.**

Recently the ESRB recalled its original rating of Bethesda's game Oblivion.

Information and discussion on the event can be found here:

<http://www.igda.org/Forums/showthread.php?threadid=21916>

The game was previously rated T for Teen and was shipped to shelves bearing the trademark rating designation and sold to happy consumers. Shortly after its release an individual not associated with Bethesda decided to create a mod for the game involving a topless option for the female characters in the game. Sorting through the code he discovered that a topless texture had already been created and was used throughout the game without the player ever being aware of it. As the game play includes clothing on all of the models, the topless variety was never seen unless the player hacked the game and worked around the code and extracted it manually.

I find it rather strange that the presence of a nipple has such a drastic effect on how a game should be rated. While the

official reasoning behind the rating modification is that the game includes more violence than the ESRB previously expected and just happens to have a nude nipple skin buried within the texture files, it's easy to see how the secondary reason would carry more weight in the aftermath of the infamous Hot Coffee scandal.

Showing the entirety of the breast save for one round bit of flesh is a-okay in most instances, yet slip a female nipple (male nipples are always okay regardless of the situation) in there and suddenly it's a scandal, regardless of whether it's portrayed in a sexual manner or not. The nude skin hack removes the shirt and bra from the characters; it does not place them in any sexually explicit situations or modify their behavior in any way. They're simply nude, not reenacting some scene from a porno. So why then is this third party modification causing so much trouble?

Unfortunately when all is said and done, this benign and much loved bit of anatomy has helped set a precedent with regards to how the ESRB determines a game's rating. The topless content was never meant to be accessed, nor was there any ability within the game play itself to enable this option. One had to essentially break into the game and manually access the content, something that gamers have been doing for years up until this point with no effect on the original game rating. What individuals do to modify the game after has released has never had any bearing on the way the original title was rated.

Imagine for a moment an art gallery filled with sculptures of anatomically correct women. The art gallery owners decide that while they'd like to maintain the original integrity and artistic design of the pieces they display, they'd rather not offend those who are disturbed by the sight of naked breasts or other 'naughty' bits. The art gallery owners put a fig leaf over the offending bits and rope off the statue. The display is opened to the public and people of the age 13 and up flood into the gallery. One of the teens visiting the gallery ducks under the roped off area and manually pries the fig leaf off of the statue, exposing the nipples.

Is this the gallery owner's fault? Should the statues now be rated 18+ because under that fig leaf there was a nipple? Regardless of the fact that they never intended it to be seen, nor willingly offered any option for the viewer to do so?

One could argue that the statues could easily be created without the nipple at all, but few artists would be happy with leaving their work unfinished. The professional artists that I've met so far have been extremely detail oriented people. It is, in fact, what makes them so good at their job. When you're attempting to create something ultra-realistic, it helps to be able to create something that looks realistic, even if the majority of people will never notice the smaller details. They could leave that little bit of detail out, but the completionist part of them doesn't want to.

While one could argue the artistic merit of a game model texture including a nipple, the idea remains the same. The content was viewed in an unintended manner, was only visible by intentionally breaking open the product, and now the owner's are being held at fault. The precedent has been set and now any game designer who does not wish to go through the tedious and costly task of having every copy of the game on the shelves relabeled must comply.

If they do not want to risk re-labeling, they have several options: Restrict game artists from creating anything that might possibly be construed as offensive, regardless of whether it will ever be accessible by the player or not. Scrutinize every bit of their work, in order to ensure that nothing manages to get into the game that wasn't intended. Scrutinize the game after it is done for any potentially offensive content and present every instance of it to the ESRB, potentially taking a higher rating and risk losing sales because of it. Include further code based protection to inhibit individuals from looking at the individual files, potentially crippling the long established modder community. This in turn could stifle sales of the game, as the ability to mod games with your own characters, places and actions has long since held the attraction of many gamers. (particularly with regards to online FPS) Personally I feel that the ESRB should have stood by its original rating on the title if the nude skin did indeed play a large part in their decision to change it. The rating it put forth was accurate for the content they had reviewed and if there was considerable work left to be done on the title (such as the addition of more violence, blood, etc), it was the responsibility of the ESRB to state that the game was not ready for review just yet. Bending to public opinion time and time again will only make the system seem faulty and weak in the eyes of the consumer. This only results in lending credence in the minds of some that game ratings should be assigned and the sale of “mature“ titles regulated by the government.

If we are to maintain our independence in gaming as another avenue of free speech and creativity, we need to ensure that we're not putting forth the wrong information. Or even worse, going back on our word. If there is a clear cut system in place in which the ratings only cover playable and purposefully unlockable content (i.e. No hacking the code or sorting through individuals files to get to it) then it is up to the consumer to decide whether or not they want to purchase the game and risk possible offense, just as they do when they view a new movie or listen to a new cd. The ratings are there to provide a rough guideline, but it needs to be made clearer that in the end it is up to the consumer themselves to make the decisions about what they're willing to risk exposing themselves and/or their children to.

In the end, I have to wonder why it is the unclothed body that causes such an uproar. Casual violence is generally accepted in gaming without much of an issue, but throw a naked breast into that mixture and suddenly it's a big deal. Regardless of the context, the unclothed female breast remains something you simply do not do in non mature rated game design, at least for the time being. Will this change in the future? Only time will tell I suppose.

Copyright © 2006 Tara J. Brannigan. All rights reserved. **There is, of course, the larger issue of the over-sexualization of female game characters and how that affects game play and psychological influence, but that'sll have to wait for another day. Today's article is about breasts in gaming from more of an anatomical and non-sexualized perspective.

What's your opinion on the issues surrounding breasts in gaming? How nude breasts are viewed by society as a whole? How the introduction of a female nipple can change the way a game is viewed, even if it's in a non-sexual manner?

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