

Greatness from Small Beginnings: Amy Hennig and the Importance of Women in Video Game Writing

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INTRODUCTION

With recent advances in video game technology, producers have encouraged writers and directors to improve their characters, dialogue, and plot lines to correspond. These narrative improvements required the use of more advanced literary techniques, now allowing audiences to analyze game writers, their games, and players in the more traditional “author, text, and reader” format.

Using the creative director of the *Uncharted* series, Amy Hennig, as an example of this new type of video game narrative, this paper explored the ways in which female writers have used a traditional literary format in recent action/adventure games to improve the portrayal of women in this genre, thereby emphasizing the importance of female creatives in the video game industry.

Despite the practically equal gender split among gaming audiences, the industry itself is still starkly male-dominated. This paper also explored the possible reasons for the smaller number of female creatives based on both feminist theory and concrete incidents on social media.

“No matter what kind of game you’re making, I think you want to engage the player on an emotional level [...] by telling a character-driven story.”

-Amy Hennig

References:

1. Gilbert & Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Yale UP, 1979.
2. Hennig. *Uncharted 3: Drake’s Deception*. Naughty Dog, Inc. 2011.
3. Marie, Meagan. “Storytellers of the Decade.” *GameInformer*, 2010.
4. Hathaway, Jay. “What is Gamergate?” *Gawker*, 2014.
5. Takahashi, Dean. “Women Claim their Place in the Game Industry.” *VentureBeat*, 2015.

METHOD

This project used the *Uncharted* action/adventure series and its primary writer/creative director, Amy Hennig, as a case study to:

- find key similarities between traditional narrative writing and video game writing using literary analysis
- study the traits of female protagonists/antagonists written by a female director as compared to those written by men
- trace the success of triple-A video game franchises with female writers/creative directors through an analysis of critic ratings
- survey the treatment of female creatives in the gaming industry using incidents on social media

DISCUSSION

This project found several points of interest in association with the methods used. For one, I was able to use traditional literary techniques to analyze both individual characters and overall plot. Hennig’s degree in English Literature seems to be key for this practice. She frequently uses literary terminology to describe her characters (e.g. Chloe Fraser as a foil to Nathan Drake), and many plot devices can be traced back to a more traditional use of motifs (e.g. the antagonist Katherine Marlowe’s use of tarot cards and their symbolic nature). The use of this particular jargon creates a basis for a study of video games in conjunction with traditional literary theories, particularly new criticism and feminism.

I utilized this basis of “video games as literature” to explore why women in the industry are underrepresented. Feminist scholars Gilbert and Gubar developed the concept of the “anxiety of authorship” (an extension of critic Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence”) to explain the plight of early nineteenth century female writers; this theory documents the doubt a female writer experiences because of the lack of a female predecessor. This theory can be applied to the video game industry today, as so few women have been able to take leadership in this male-dominated space. This paper theorized that, through the trailblazing of female writers like Hennig and Rhianna Pratchett (*Tomb Raider*, 2013), there may be more women breaking into the industry to share their talents.

Though female writers have been few in number to the present date, those who have entered the industry have done so with great success (see graph). Despite critical acclaim, however, many women have been met with harassment, especially online. The misogyny of gaming community was especially showcased in 2014 during the “Gamergate scandal,” which was used to target women in game journalism and development under the guise of creating an ethical gaming community (Hathaway). Though many women took this opportunity to stand up for one another online, the threats incurred impeded to enter the real world. Fortunately, bringing these incidents to light has both shown outsiders the current treatment of women in the industry and given those women an opportunity to advocate for respect and positive recognition (e.g. the “1ReasonToBe” movement).

AVERAGE GAME RATING (BY STUDIO)



Games were chosen based on studio, series, and gender of the lead writer. *Tomb Raider* (2013) was written by Rhianna Pratchett, while *Tomb Raider Underworld* was co-written by Eric Lindstrom and Toby Gard; *Drake's Fortune* was co-written by Hennig, Josh Scherr, and Neil Druckmann, while Hennig was the lead writer on *Drake's Deception*. Ratings were averaged from the overall critic scores from four major online game journals: *GameInformer*, *IGN*, *Metacritic*, and *Gamespot*.

CONCLUSION

The female game writers in the 21st century tend to create more well-developed female characters when compared to games from the 1980s and 1990s, encouraging more women to both interact with video games and possibly join the gaming industry themselves. With the growing emphasis on women in STEM, the video game industry creates an important intersection between STEM and the Humanities, especially with the use of literary techniques in game writing. The need for more female influence is emphasized even more so by the success of female writers in the industry—those that have had the opportunity to perform the role of lead writer have been met with excellent reviews, yet there are far too few women given this role for major (triple-A) studios at this time. Just as women are being encouraged to pursue careers in fields like engineering and mathematics, humanities backgrounds are key to creating well-rounded creative products in the digital age.