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Out of the Margins: Evolving Narrative Representation of Women in Video Games

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at

Virginia Commonwealth University

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List of Abbreviations

AAA – Triple A game; games produced by large-scale publishers

AI – Artificial Intelligence

DLC – Downloadable Content

NPC – Non-Player Character

PC – Player Character

RPG – Role Playing Game

Abstract

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This thesis examines narrative representation of female characters in video games and
how game narratives and representations contribute to socio-cultural discourse. First, this thesis
explores and defines the cultural background for female representation in video games. It then
defines video games as a type of text and describes the features that are unique to games, such as
the use of avatars, and what impacts these features have on game narratives. The thesis attempts
to establish evidence of an evolutionary arc of comprehensive female representation in video
games by first exploring historical female narrative tropes, and then comparing them to narrative
case studies of female characters within five recent game titles (*Tomb Raider*, *Bayonetta*,
Dragon Age, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, and *Horizon: Zero Dawn*). In these case studies, the
implications for their representations of female characters are analyzed in the context of socio-
cultural discourse. Furthermore, this thesis argues for the importance of diverse representation
within video games as a form of media, and as cultural objects that contribute to social discourse.

Out of the Margins:

Evolving Narrative Representation of Women in Video Games

I.   Introduction: The Cultural Context for Games Studies

Historically, the video game industry has been a masculine-dominated space. From a lack

of women on the development side, to a hypermasculine narrative standard, games have often

struggled with the issue of diverse female representation. The pervasive trend has been for

female characters to appear as secondary and hyper-sexualized, even from the industry's

inception. Indeed, most early video games feature male leads (like Pac-man, Mario, and Zelda)

and female characters were either secondary (Princess Peach), without agency (Princess Peach

and Princess Zelda), or sexualized (Lara Croft). However, in recent years, there have been a few

games that feature well-rounded female protagonists/leads, both from indie and AAA ('triple a')

studios, such as the AAA game *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017) and the indie game *Transistor*

(2014) that break pre-established gender norm conventions within video games. As Malkowski

and Russworm point out, "representations actually change slowly in digital media, just as they

have in more traditional forms of media."[1] Thus, despite a problematic history, shifts are

beginning to occur at all levels of gaming culture. Even so, until within the past two decades,

there has not been sustained or prominent attention to theories of identity, politics, and

representation from the broader world of visual culture studies—or to the use of games to

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[1] Malkowski, Jennifer and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, "Introduction" in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*. (Indiana University Press, 2017), 8.

challenge and reshape those theories—within mainstream game studies disciplines.[2] Because of this convention, problematic gaming narratives have not been examined in the depth required.

Games are not often considered in scholarship definitively as traditional 'texts,' or classified firmly as 'texts' at all. Much of humanities scholarship explores whether or not games can be categorized as 'cyber-text' or 'hyper-text' and what such categorization entails, defining games as play-objects (ludology) and defining how and if games are 'textual' objects (narratology).[3] In ludology studies, scholars examine video games alongside board games in exploration of the mechanics and rhetorics of play, instead of as narratives that rely on narrative conventions to convey meaning. Michalis Kokonis notes: "on the one hand, the so-called narratologists approach games for their narrative dimension; on the other hand, the ludologists focus attention on the mechanics of the functions of computer games and reject an analysis of games as narratives."[4] In other words, most of the focus in games scholarship lies within either formalism or situationism. Astrid Ensslin argues:

> Games studies tends to be seen as a discipline more akin to media and cultural studies and is typically found in institutional isolation from English departments, because games as literary or verbal art used to be few and far between. However, the past decade has seen a proliferation of such digital media hybrids. Digital media is becoming a productive, receptive, and participatory platform that requires novel ways of close play and reading.[5]

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[2] Ibid., 2.

[3] Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 7-14.

[4] Kokonis, Michalis, "Intermediality between Games and Fiction: The 'Ludology vs. Narratology' Debate in Computer Game Studies: A Response to Gonzalo Frasca. *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae: Film & Media Studies* 9, no. 1 (2014): 171-188.

[5] Ensslin, Astrid, *Literary Gaming* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 7.

Sociological and psychological studies have explored representation in games and their social effects; however, humanities scholarship has not addressed these issues until recently. As such, limited works exist that examine games in terms of cultural studies, or ones that analyze games as narratives with narrative theories, and/or via reader-response criticism. Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. note that one scholar, Susana Tosca, performed a close reading of the game *Resident Evil Code: Veronica X* (2000), in which she harnessed techniques of reader-response criticism (textual analysis, examining noteworthy properties of the game's structure, and the exploring the meaning of the game's story), but "surprisingly, given the number of humanist scholars in the field, this is one of just a few detailed analyses of an individual game title."[6] Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. add further taxonomy for games studies to the categories that Salen and Zimmerman laid out in *Rules of Play* (2004): "they suggest games may be approached with a focus on *rules* (the design of the game), *play* (the human experience of playing the game), or *culture* (the larger contexts engage with and inhabited by the game); to these we add those of *ontology* and *metrics* to arrive at five main perspectives: the game, the players, the culture, ontology, and metrics."[7] These additional categories allow games studies to feature more comprehensive ways of approaching games, including as texts embedded in cultural contexts. Games are not simply play objects or systems, but they are also not simply narratives. Instead, they are a combination of these, and in expanding game studies taxonomy, games can be looked at comprehensively in ways that better suit the complexity of their contents and features.

The cultural features, such as representation and identity, found in games communities and game narratives "are complex systems that are always relevant to the ways in which games, codes, platforms—indeed, all technologies—are constructed. Representation in game studies

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[6] Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 10.
[7] Ibid., 11.

must be viewed as a system that functions as akin to—rather than a distraction from—the discipline's more celebrated, hard-core objects of study."[8] Games studies, then, "should be comprehensive enough to welcome their analysis" and should acknowledge that "a focus on race, gender, and sexuality need not exclude other factors of production, and such analyses must be accountable to the medium-specificity of video games."[9] Games are stories, however, they also are *games* and cannot be divorced from their mechanical/technical components. Indeed, many of these components are factors in how their narratives are shaped. In this study, I will conduct close analyses of a sample of recent and popular video game titles while holding the assumption that video games can and should be considered as types of narrative texts, with their own set of medium-specific rules (i.e. as a separate genre of text) that are, in a way, redefining traditional characteristics of narrative.[10]

In my analyses, I will further stress the importance of applying cultural rhetorics of gender to examining games: "investigating cultural rhetorics of gender means examining ways that games reflect, reinforce, question, or subvert cultural ideas about the categories of masculine and feminine, male and female, transgender and other concepts related to gendered identity. Saying that games can interact with ideologies of gender presupposes that gendered cultural codes exist within society at large."[11] The problem of representation both stems from and perpetuates through the game industry and the narratives that video games produce. While playing games with problematic representations does not necessarily mean that individuals who

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[8] Malkowski and Russworm, 3.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Murray, Janet, "From Game-Story to Cyberdrama" *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game.* ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 2-12.

[11] Salen, Katie and Eric Zimmerman, Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 522.

play such games will become misogynists and reflect misogynistic ideals and tendencies, video games with pro-hypermasculine messages are a part of cultural discourse and the messages they send have effects on that discourse, such as the normalization of the patriarchal notion that women are secondary to men. One of the more prominent examples of the effects games can have on culture at large is evidenced in the 2014 Gamergate controversy.

In 2014, briefly following the release of game developer Zoë Quinn's game *Depression Quest* (2013), the online controversy which came to be known as Gamergate began. Perpetuated anonymously or pseudonymously by users via websites such as Twitter, Reddit, and 4chan, this "movement" ostensibly sought to expose what proponents viewed as unethical collusion between feminists, progressives, game reviewers, and developers in an alleged call for appropriate ethics in game journalism and development.[12] But the reality of Gamergate was that it focused its attacks disproportionately towards women in the gaming industry: "Gamergate has been defined by its continual attacks on any woman who speaks out against them [supporters] or attracts their ire for bringing feminist discourse or views into gaming."[13] And according to Quinn in her memoir, *Crash Override* (2017), Gamergate had more personal origins steeped in sexist abuse, which ultimately grew into attacks on any person that spoke out either in defense of Quinn, or attempted to address problematic attitudes and representations in games and the gaming community. Quinn states: "I was patient zero of the cultural phenomenon that would come to be called Gamergate"[14] and further explains that "Gamergate wasn't really about video games so much as it was a flashpoint for radicalized online hatred that had a long list of targets before, and

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[12] Paaβen, Benjamin et al, "What is a True Gamer? The Male Gamer Stereotype and the Marginalization of Women in Video Game Culture" *SR*, 76 (2016): 421-35.
[13] Salter, A. and B. Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing.* (Orlando, FL.: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 91.
[14] Quinn, Zoë, *Crash Override.* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs: Hatchett Book Group, 2017), 15.

after, my name was added to it. The movement helped solidify the growing connections between online white supremacist movements, misogynist nerds, conspiracy theorists, and dispassionate hoaxers who derive a sense of power from disseminating disinformation."[15] Gamergate quickly became a targeted harassment campaign against self-titled feminists and other minorities within the gaming industry, such as Anita Sarkeesian (a game critic and host of Feminist Frequency's series *Tropes vs. Women in* Games), Brianna Wu (game developer and co-founder of the video game studio Giant Spacekat)—as well as female and minority game developers and players: "Gamergate has hit the most marginalized people the hardest, from being blacklisted in the gaming industry, to being driven from their homes, even framed for a terrorist attack in Paris. Every time we speak out against this abuse, we receive hundreds of gleeful messages in reply, simultaneously insisting that none of this is actually happening and that we all totally had it coming."[16]

The types of abuse and harassment Quinn and others received ranged in the extreme: from anonymous comments which threatened violence or used sexist hate speech (such as the comments Quinn received in one of her inboxes shown in figure 1.1), to doxing (i.e. users anonymously publishing personal information like phone numbers or addresses with malicious intent online), and to sending constant rape and death threats.

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[15] Ibid, 4.
[16] Ibid, 19.
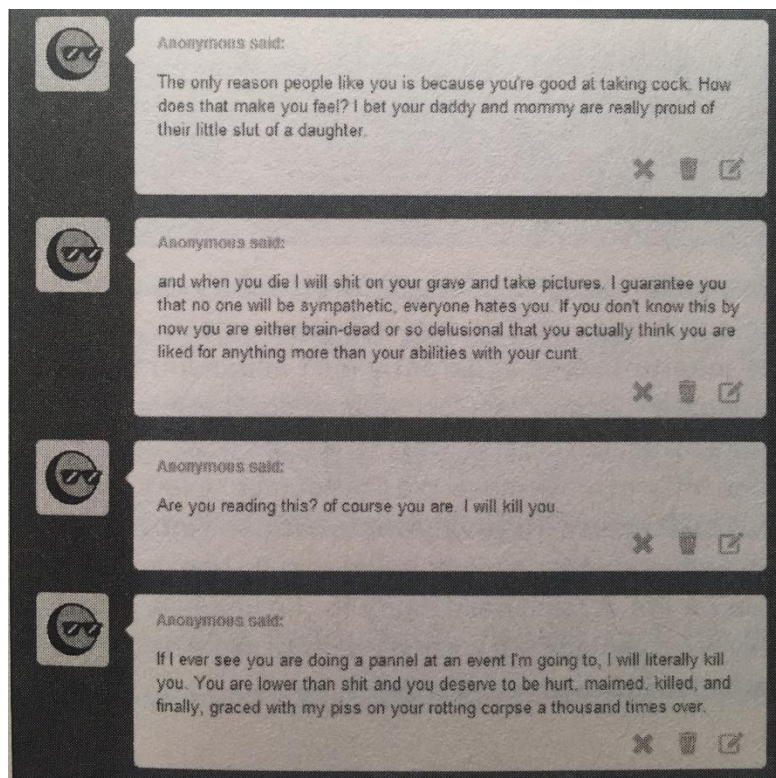
Fig. 1.1: Zoë Quinn Inbox Messages, Screenshot by
Zoë Quinn, Sourced from: *Crash Override*, 2017.

In one particularly graphic example, a flash game was invented and published on

Newgrounds.com by Bendilin Spurr (titled "Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian") that featured a photo of

Anita Sarkeesian's face and players could then use weapons to beat it until bruised and bloody.

The description of the game stated that "Anita Sarkeesian 'claims to want gender equality in

video games, but in reality, she just wants to use the fact that she was born with a vagina to get

free money and sympathy from everyone who crosses her path'" and as Anastasia Salter and

Bridgit Blodgett go on to point out: "this vicious comment gets straight to the heart of the

creator's attitude: Sarkeesian's gender and support have, in his mind, invited him to make her

into a literal punching bag."[17] Many targets, like Sarkeesian, were advocating for increased

diversity and awareness of problematic gaming conventions within games and games

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[17] Salter and Blodgett, 91.

communities. Those who supported and perpetuated Gamergate were pushing back against the perceived increase of diversity, inclusion, and social criticism video game narratives.[18] In many ways, the Gamergate controversy was a front in the culture wars that have been taking place not just within gaming communities, but within other online communities as well.

The pervasive socio-cultural assumption that 'video games are for boys' is part of what critics like Sarkeesian have been speaking out against and is part of what fueled the vitriol in Gamergate proponents. Video games have historically been categorized as male spaces, as Christopher Near argues, "video games are usually gendered as a masculine only space that is attractive only to a male audience."[19] As they inhabit masculine spaces, the content of games typically appeals to hypermasculine ideals and power fantasies by including heavy violence and sexualized female characters (which Sarkeesian pointed out in the *Tropes vs. Women in Games* series). Further compounding the element of gender disparity is the fact that video games are one key aspect of 'geek-culture,' a space itself that is already viewed as marginal and masculinized, and which "has taken assumptions of marginalization as foundational" and was "once defined by their ["geeks'"] outsider status and victimization."[20] This space lies assumedly in the margins (Salter and Blodgett refer to it as a microsystem), with self-identified 'geeks' taking a stance as victims. So, when the space begins to include more and more individuals who do not identify as male, this inclusion becomes a threat to the established group order.

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[18] Chess, Shira, *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity.* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
[19] Near, Christopher E., "Selling Gender: Associations of Box Art Representation of Female Characters with Sales for Teen- and Mature-rated Video Games" *SR.* 68 (2012): 252-69.
[20] Salter and Blodgett, 12.

As female gamers and critics become more visible within gaming communities, they become perceived as "interlopers"[21] and their increasing visibility "may be to the male viewer a sign that women are abruptly dominating a space, so too is the increased visibility and participation of women in gaming threatening the very foundations of the microsystem."[22] As such, "women in gaming culture face more than a little hostility from outspoken male gamers."[23] There are several ways the myth of a 'female threat' perpetuates, but it largely stems from a gender and diversity disparity that starts within the game development industry and trickles down into the marketing of games (in cover/box art, ads, and videos), the content of games (how female figures are represented), and whether or not women and girls choose to identify as 'gamers.' All these factors compound each other, and this results in heavily gendered tensions within gaming communities.

Critics like Sarkeesian have pointed out problematic depictions of female characters in games, and the continuance of these types of depictions are fueled by certain male gamers (like the proponents of Gamergate), and the nature of the game development industry. A part of the problem with the prevalent types of female representation in games lies in the fact that there are not as many women involved in the development process. As of 2014, "women and girls comprised only 22% of employees in the video game industry,"[24] despite the fact that there is not a shortage of women in the graphic design and computer science fields. The 22% is a marked increase from the industry's initial 3% (in 1989), but that is a growth of 19% over a period of

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[21] Paaβen et al., 422

[22] Salter and Blodgett, 89

[23] DeWinter, Jennifer and Carly A. Kocurek, "'Aw, Fuck, I Got a Bitch on My Team!': Women and Exclusionary Cultures of the Computer Game Complex" in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* (Indiana University Press, 2017), 57-73.

[24] Lynch, Teresa et al, "Sexy, Strong, and Secondary: A Content Analysis of Female Characters in Video Games across 31 Years" *JoC*, 66(2016): 564-84.

twenty-five years. And even still, "when dividing job descriptions by gender, male workers heavily dominate most of the core content creation roles and women make up only 5% of the programming in the video game industry."[25] Furthermore, women make up 30% of the writer roles, and only 10% of the design roles.

Feminist narratology theory, and feminist theory in general, have often explored whether or not the gender of the creator of a literary work (or piece of media) has an effect on both the content of the narrative and the way the narrative is structured, with many critics noting such a correlation as likely and possible.[26] Within the terms of the gaming industry, by not having women create the narrative/play content of games, heteronormative male-centric narratives are likely perpetuated and fed back into the cultural environment. Male-centric narratives have historically been pervasive in all types of media. As Ruth Page points out most owners and controllers of media institutions are men, which leads to "the assumption of the ideal reader as male, and representation of women and men in asymmetrical ways reflected in features such as naming choices, uses of evaluation, and in broad terms the articulation of gender stereotypes."[27] Games are an influential type of media, and the stories they tell have far reaching effects. What is problematic then is that excluding women from the development and writing of games potentially allows for problematic representations of women in games to be perpetuated. DeWinter and Kocurek reference a piece written by a former writer for the studio BioWare, David Gaider, which discussed a peer review session in which "women on the team noted a sexual situation in a plot for the game *Dragon Age* (2009) could potentially be interpreted as a form of rape. Gaider questioned:

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[25] De Clerq, Lize, "Why are there so few female game developers?" (Unite-It.eu.com, 2016)
[26] Page, Ruth E, *Literary and Linguistic Approaches to Feminist Narratology.* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).
[27] Ibid, 118.

'Had that female writer been the lone woman, would her view have been

disregarded as an over-reaction? A lone outlier? How often does that happen on

game development teams, ones made up of otherwise intelligent and liberal guys

who are then shocked to find out that they inadvertently offended a group that is

quickly approaching *half the gaming audience?* '[28]

DeWinter and Kocurek then assert that "limited numbers of women are just as bad as no women

if women are isolated and silenced in the workforce,"[29] a sentiment echoed by Teresa Lynch:

"the preponderance of men in the game industry leads to a culture in which the male perspective

is the only one."[30] The exclusion (and potential isolation) of female creators contributes to the

perpetuation of female stereotypes and problematic narratives and/or character depictions. These

stereotypes and depictions then feed into existing attitudes adopted towards women involved in

the gaming community.

The trend has been for female developers and gamers to be pushed to the margins and not

be included at best, and at worst, openly mocked, harassed, and/or ridiculed. Teresa Lynch

references a "systematic socialization of women away from technology in which caregivers

describe boys as having intuitive capability and inclination toward computers whereas girls must

work hard to master the skills needed to operate the machines."[31] This line of thinking

discourages women from engaging with technology in general. Such a deterrence then "produces

a self-perpetuating cycle in which 'girls who do not play become women who do not use

computing technology and certainly do not aspire to make games' (Williams, 2006, p. 16)."[32] In

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[28] DeWinter and Kocurek, 66-7.
[29] Ibid., 67.
[30] Lynch, Teresa et al, 566.
[31] Ibid., 566.
[32] Ibid., 566.

addition to being systematically discouraged from making games, women and girls who play

games may even choose to hide their gender when playing online multi-player games out of fear

of being harassed by male players.[33] Adrienne Shaw's 2012 study found that "there was a

definite correlation between gender and gamer identity; men were much more likely to identify

as 'gamers' than female, transgender, or gender queer individuals were"[34] and that "no other

category, including, race, sexuality, religion, education, age or type of gaming platform,

demonstrated such a striking disparity between who identified as a gamer and who did not."[35]

Indeed, 'gamer' identity is intersectional with other identities (race, orientation, and etc.), but

Shaw noted women are often among the most marginalized. But, "if women are less likely to

perform their identity visibly, it is less likely that the video game industry will view them as a

target audience."[36] The video game industry has not historically had an obvious motivation to

market their games and those games' contents towards any other audience than a male one, due

to both the categorization of games as male spaces, as well as women not visibly preforming a

'gamer' role. As such, "the video game industry continues to create content that panders towards

the presumed preferences of a young, male, heterosexual audience."[37] Christopher Near further

highlights this potential marketing motivation for problematic portrayals of female and minority

characters, based on the results of his 2014 game sales study: "the presence of central male

characters [on box art] was positively associated with sales" and "among Teen- and Mature-rated

games, sales are highest in games with box art depicting non-central, sexualized female

characters, but the sexualization of female characters is associated with higher sales only when

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[33] Ibid.

[34] Shaw, Adrienne "Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity" *NM&S* 14, no. 1 (2012): 28-44.

[35] Ibid., 33.

[36] Paaβen et al., 428.

[37] Ibid., 421.

no female characters are central on box art."[38] Thus, if developers and studios believe that

marginalization will increase game sales towards their target audience (i.e. men), they then use it

to increase sales, and the trend of hypermasculinity and marginalization of women continues in a

vicious cycle.

Evidence of pandering towards male-centric desires (focusing on stereotypically

'masculine' interests such as violence, war, and sex) is widely reflected in ads for games.[39]

Pandering solely towards a male audience advances the construction of games as an entirely

masculinized space. Social theorists have then suggested that women and girls can become

further discouraged from playing games due to both the toxic nature of the community and the

ways which women are depicted within the games. In fact, only "4% of modern game titles

structure narrative gameplay around a woman in a leading role,"[40] and even then, many of the

female leads in games are portrayed in highly sexualized or otherwise problematic ways. Games

that break these conventions typically come from independent ("indie") studios instead of larger

(or AAA) companies and are not as readily recognizable or well-known.

Traditionally, both narratively and visually, female game characters have been

represented as secondary to, or entirely dependent on, male character(s)—with many having

"hyper-sexual" characteristics, or clothing/armor that emphasizes such characteristics (illustrated

in figure 1.2 in a sampling of several game characters across different titles).[41]

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[38] Near, 260.

[39] Miller, Monica K. and Alicia Summers, "Gender Differences in Video Game Characters' Roles, Appearances, and Attire as Portrayed in Video Game Magazines" *SR,* 57 (2007): 733-42.

[40] Sarkeesian, Anita, "Damsel in Distress: Part 3" *Tropes vs. Women in Games.* Feminist Frequency (YouTube.com, 2013).

[41] Ibid.

Figure 1.2. Sexualized Female Characters, Brooke Cunningham, June 21, 2017. Digital Image. Sourced from: https://medusamagazine.com/are-strong-female-characters-a-ploy-by-the-patriarchy

It is also very common to see female characters depicted with highly unrealistic body

proportions, often in addition to being secondary to a male character and wearing

revealing/sexualized clothing. 'Sexy' female characters are not inherently problematic, however,

their sexualization becomes so when considering the fact that most of these female characters

have little to no agency and are placed in narrative positions that are secondary to a male

character. These types of female characters occur across most video game titles, and notable

examples are found in the popular game titles of the *Super Mario* (1985-2019) franchise and the

Grand Theft Auto (1997-2013) franchise, as well as games like *Bayonetta* (2009) and *Devil May*

Cry (2001). The established norm is for female characters to be objectified and secondary within

games and game advertisements. As Near summarizes,

> Quantitative studies of the representation of female characters in video games has
>
> consistently shown that women are underrepresented relative to men and are more
>
> likely to be depicted in sexualized and passive roles. Female characters were more
>
> likely to be depicted as sex objects (Dietz 1998), sexier (Burgess et al. 2007),
>
> more attractive (Scharrer 2004) or in ways that were sexually suggestive (Ivory

2006). When female characters were pictured as dominant, they also were more

likely to be portrayed as hypersexualized (Jansz and Martis 2007).[42]

On the same note, male characters are often depicted as hypermasculine: "for men, the gender

portrayal is equally blatant, showing men as symbols of power and dominance. Male physical

appearance is hypermasculine, often featuring chest and arm muscles in massive and unrealistic

proportions."[43] Gendered portrayals in video games lean heavily towards a heteronormative

male-hero fantasy, wherein female characters "may appear empowered, but they are actually

created to appeal to the young, male game player."[44] Several studies have conducted both content

analysis and surveys on how male and female characters have been represented in video games,

with their results showing an adherence towards stereotypical portrayals, such as Karen E. Dill's

and Kathryn P. Thill's 2007 study which found in video game magazines "male characters (83%)

are more likely than female characters (62%) to be shown as aggressive. Female characters are

more likely than male characters to be shown as sexualized (60% versus 1%), scantily clad (39%

versus 8%) and as showing a mix of sex and aggression (39% versus 1%)."[45] Sexist

representations such as those found in video games are a part of a larger cultural milieu, and in

perpetuating stereotypical portrayals, problematic sexist and heteronormative narratives are

reinforced in social consciousness, as stated by Karen Dill: "video games tend to send blatant

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[42] Near, 253.

[43] Dill, Karen E. et al., "Violence, Sex, Race, and Age in Popular Video Games: A Content Analysis" *Featuring Females: Feminist Analyses of Media*, ed. by E. Cole and J. H. Daniel. (American Psychological Association, 2005), 117.

[44] Ibid., 117.

[45] Dill, Karen E. and Kathryn P. Thill. "Video Game Characters and the Socialization of Gender Roles: Young People's Perceptions Mirror Sexist Media Depictions" *SR*. 57(2007): 851-64.

messages about gender in Western culture."[46] In other words, games cannot be divorced from their cultural contexts.

Culturally, the gaming industry, gaming communities, and the content of video games reflect an adherence to heteronormative, white, and patriarchal societal norms, which require women and minorities to be marginalized—while 'gaming' in general is a sub-set of the already marginal 'geek-culture.' There are few women working as content developers in the industry (due in part to a socio-cultural deterrent away from the technology industry). Thus, female voices are not being represented in games overall, leading to pervasive trends of the hypermasculine male hero as the standard video game character. Having a male hero character as the standard, and having sexist and stereotypical female characters that are often secondary or subservient, can prevent women and girls from playing games: "when women see repeated negative depictions of female characters in video games, they may avoid the medium entirely and become part of the self-perpetuating cycle."[47] Such representations, insofar as they reinforce problematic attitudes towards women, can thus make video game culture resistant to minority groups, which then leads to communities seeing games and gaming culture as a masculine and white-only space where women are interlopers or otherwise unwelcome—especially when women point out that the accepted norms are fundamentally flawed and exclusionary. DeWinter and Kocurek explain that "some male gamers embrace gaming as the last bastion of homosocial male space, fighting to protect it from a slow creeping integration of gender. For these men, women's presence in games—as players, producers, and even characters—taints the form."[48] Such attitudes have led to antagonistic behaviors towards women and girls if they perform their gamer identity; it has

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[46] Dill et al., (2005), 117.
[47] Lynch, 567.
[48] DeWinter and Kocurek, 60

also led to the invention of terms in online forums such as "feminist killjoy" and "hobby feminist." The former term can be understood as "a figure that brings others down, not only by talking about 'unhappy' topics such as sexism but also by exposing how others' happiness is sustained by erasing and ignoring signs of 'not getting along.'"[49] Whereas "hobby feminist" was used by one user in the World of Warcraft forums examined by Andrea Braithwaite to dismiss feminist arguments in the comment threads. This particular user defined such a feminist in this way: "'You know, the ones that have nothing better to do than sit around and complain about vaguely flirtatious dialogue, instead of battling REAL sexism.'"[50] Both of these terms are examples of the infantilizing dialogue aimed at disparaging feminist critiques and maintaining masculine norms:

> 'It's people like you that ruin the world for the rest of us. You literally cried until a good character was gutted because YOU didn't like the character. You imposed YOUR sensibilities on others and subjected the rest of us to your overly sensitive nature. So for all of us we now have a LESS enjoyable experience, a less enriched experience full of diverse characters, all because YOU got your panties in a bunch because and NPC [non-playable character] called you pretty. YOU ruin good things for the rest of us and you should be ashamed of yourselves.'[51]

By using highly gender-coded language ("got your panties in a bunch") and terms such as "unhappy" and "sensitive" in a derogatory and infantilizing fashion to refer to users making feminist arguments, users that do so are actively maintaining the perceived norm of the space

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[49] Braithwaite, Andrea, "'Seriously, get out': Feminists on the forums and the War(craft) on women" *NM&S* 16, no. 5 (2014): 703-18.
[50] Ibid., 708.
[51] Ibid., 708.

they inhabit. Indeed, female gamers are more likely to be targeted for online sexual harassment.[52]

Using gendered terms and referring to feminist users dismissively as "girl" is a sexist and

infantilizing tactic that enforces patriarchal power structures and causes women and girls to

either stay out of gaming communities and/or not otherwise preform a 'gamer' identity. This

then leads to studios having no marketing inclination to market games towards women. The

cycle continues and creates tensions that ultimately are brought to a head in situations like

Gamergate. Gamergate, by extension, is a large-scale pushback against anyone who dares to

make an argument for games and the gaming industry to be more inclusive, and to treat both

female and minority characters more fairly and representatively. Further, Gamergate illustrates a

social reluctance to accept changes within the game industry. The previous block-quote, for

example, is in reference to the studio Blizzard's response of removing a minor, non-plot centric

non-playable character that greeted only female players with the sexist dialogue lines: "'Hello,

friend! You're some kind of gorgeous aren't you? I bet you can't keep the men off you!'"[53] after

Blizzard faced significant public backlash from some of their game's players. Gamergate

illustrates a vicious self-perpetuating cycle of gender discrimination that permeates throughout

the entirety of video games and their culture.

  Part of what led to Gamergate is that in recent years, games have been showing efforts to

become more inclusive, and thus are increasingly "threatening" the male space games inhabit.

Teresa Lynch et al.'s 2016 study of 571 game titles from years 1983-2014 found that, on the

whole, sexualization of female characters has been on the decline since 2006: "we found a

pattern of change in sexualization over time that indicates the industry may be reacting to its

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[52] Paaβen, 429.
[53] Ibid., 705.

critics."[54] Their study split sexualization of female characters categorically into eleven variables, such as areas of a character's body associated with sexual characteristics (i.e. chest, buttocks, waist, and legs) and if the characters moved in a sexually suggestive way(s). Their results are illustrated in figures 1.3 and 1.4, which were taken directly from the results portion of their study. In summary, their data "indicated that female characters during *Time Block 1* [1989-1992] (*M=*.73*, SD=* 1.21*)* were less sexualized than characters in *Time Block 2* [1992-1998] (*M=* 1.57, *SD=* 1.65) and *Time Block 3* [1999-2006] (*M=* 1.66, *SD=*1.58), *p* <.001 for both differences. Additionally, female characters from *Time Block 4* [2007-2014] (*M=* 1.13, *SD=*1.42) were less sexualized than those appearing in *Time Block 3*, p=.01."[55] The graphs in figures 1.4 and 1.5 show the variations in occurrence of sexualization.
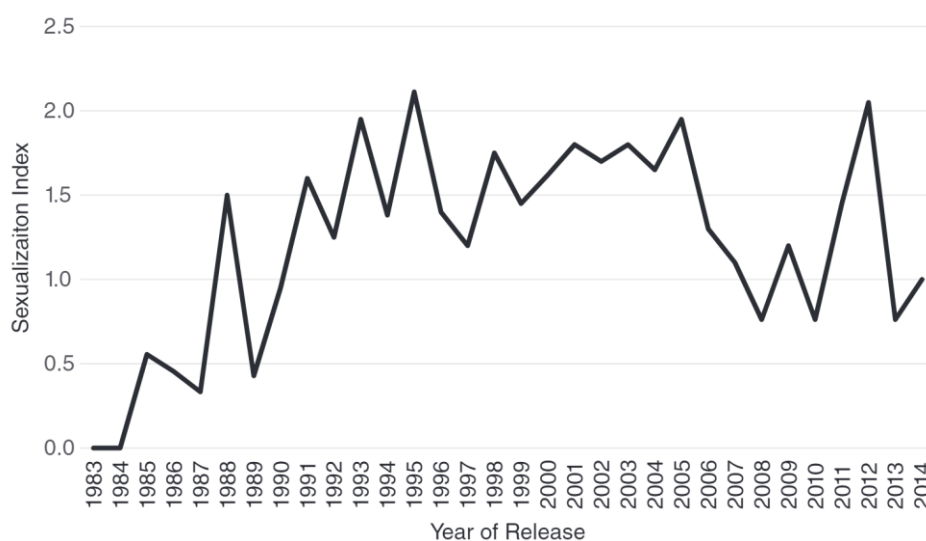
Figure 1.3. Average Sexualization of characters by year of release, Teresa Lynch *et al.*, 2016. Print Image. Sourced from: "Sexy, Strong, and Secondary: A Content Analysis of Female Characters in Video Games across 31 Years" *Journal of Communication*.

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[54] Lynch et al., 572-79.
[55] Ibid., 574.
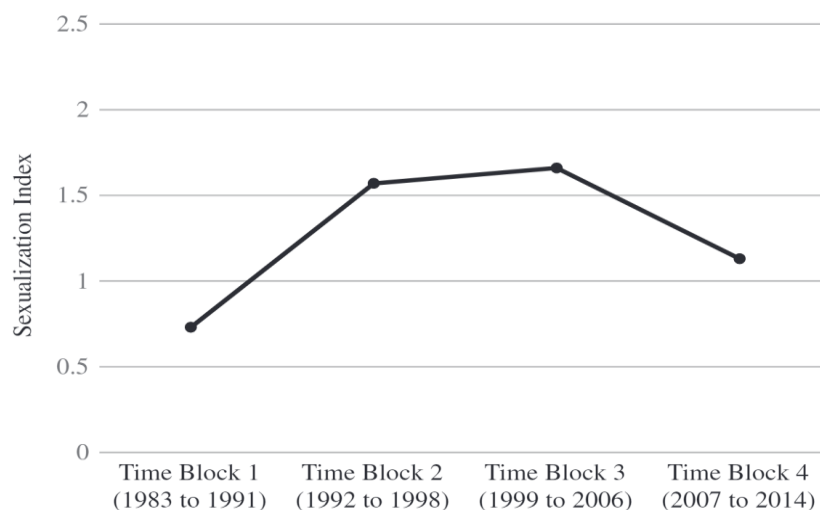
Figure 1.4. Sexualization of characters over time, Teresa Lynch *et al.*, 2016, Print Image. Sourced from: "Sexy, Strong, and Secondary: A Content Analysis of Female Characters in Video Games across 31 Years" *Journal of Communication.*

What Lynch and others posit is that games and game companies are increasingly becoming aware of problematic aspects of gaming culture (and 'geek-culture'), which perhaps supports the notion that gaming studios are beginning to show an interest in inclusion: "the mainstreaming of geek culture and the incredible popularity enjoyed now by formerly geek-associated media genres such as comics, science fiction, and fantasy is drawing attention to the unevenness of gender representations within these mediums."[56] As cultural discourse reflects an increasing amount of awareness of the issues regarding one-sided representation within games, games begin to illustrate an awareness of those issues in conversation with other media sources. Salen and Zimmerman sum up this point *Rules of Play* (2004): "as objects produced and played within culture at large, all games reflect their cultural contexts to some degree."[57] Thus, with cultural shifts come some shifts within the content of games.

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[56] Salter and Blodgett, 13.
[57] Salen and Zimmerman, 516.

It is likely that these changes indicate that as "a number of incidents have signaled challenges to that purportedly masculine culture"[58] the "increasing social legitimization of feminist concerns catalyzed the changing representations of female characters."[59] Games seem to be slowly changing to better reflect the reality of their demographic (as roughly half of all people who play games are female-identified), as well as attempting to give users a more inclusive gaming experience. In fact, a recent (2019) survey conducted by the gaming company EA "found that 56 percent of 2,252 survey participants (from ages 13-54) consider it important for companies to make their games more inclusive" and that "45 percent said that they would be 'likelier to play' a game that included these features. The survey implies that backlash against inclusive features comes from a minority of players."[60] Gamergate stands as evidence of the anxiety of the few members of the gaming community over the fading dominance of what has been considered the primary audience of video games (white men), and the increasingly rapid growth and changes to the industry have created the level of anxiety that supports and perpetuates the violent hate speech exposed by Gamergate. The space that has traditionally been claimed solely by a white male audience is increasingly becoming something claimed by both non-male and non-white audiences. With certain studios bringing female narratives and authorship out of the margins and into the spotlight, male narratives and established norms are being challenged for their more problematic aspects and made less of a standard, which has led to tensions and hate within the game industry and community.

Diverse representation within all media is important for both marginalized and non-marginalized groups (as it leads to a normalization of diversity), but I contend it is especially so

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[58] Lynch et al., 564.
[59] Ibid., 579.
[60] Brown, Fraser, "EA Survey finds majority of players want games to be more inclusive" (PCgamer.com, 2009).

in regard to video games due to the cyclical nature of sexist discrimination that the industry and the community is, and has been, dealing with. Proponents of Gamergate and other like-minded individuals operate as gatekeepers and as identity-police to female audiences by policing what is acceptable under their previously established 'laws' that adhere to masculine standards. Because gaming has been "heavily associated with the male gender, women who display a gamer identity fact a social cost; for example, women who reveal their gender in multiplayer games are likely to be challenged over their legitimacy and competence. In turn, fewer women visibly preform their role as a gamer."[61] Thus, studios have less incentive (despite the call for inclusion) to market games towards women because male gamers are the more visible demographic. What this then means is that it becomes hard for game spaces to not stay visibly masculine and it then constantly reasserts its own masculine-centric internal rules. In order to break the cycle, it is imperative that games begin to include women at all levels of the community, particularly within development and the narratives of games themselves. The current 'masculine-first' attitudes that run as an undercurrent within the gaming community can discourage women from playing games and searching for jobs within the field. But including lead female characters with truly nuanced and emotionally investing narratives will likely slowly begin to normalize the presence of women in games at a base level, and with normalization comes the fact that women will stop being seen as 'interlopers' in a space that has 'only been for boys.' This sentiment was echoed at the end of Teresa Lynch et al.'s statistical study: "normalizing female characters toward competent and non-objectified depictions may be part of the puzzle of mitigating hostility toward women in gaming. For this reason, the trend toward decreased sexualization of female characters—especially if implemented without sacrificing their capability or diminishing their

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[61] Paaβen et al., 426-30.

prominence in the game—is promising in cultivating a more egalitarian game culture for all."[62]

Having female characters that do not lose agency, especially ones that do not lose agency

towards a male character, and female characters that are not offered for the consumption of a

male gaze may help mitigate problematic attitudes circulating within the gaming community.

Considering the climate of the game industry, and with events like Gamergate still

resonating in the socio-cultural consciousness, it is essential to productively study representation

in video games in order to understand that "the social, political, and cultural context of the

#Gamergate era, the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and fan-created campaigns like

#INeedDiverseGames make this a unique and urgent time for game studies to develop better

critical proficiencies for representational and identity-based analyses."[63] Games and game

culture are highly intersectional, and analyses need to acknowledge such considerations.

Furthermore, as Lynch noted, there has been a trend (at least as of 2014) of decreased sexualized

representations of female characters. This study will explore questions of if and how the state of

female representation in games has and/or can be improved, by considering the past trends for

female representation, both narratively and visually, and by comparing them to current trends.

This study will also consider the female characters' positions in relation to male characters (i.e.

whether they are "dominant" or "submissive") and their roles in their narratives (villain, helper,

princess, and etcetera), while drawing on key concepts in feminist literary and narrative theory.

Analyses of visual features like character armor/attire, body shape, and the prominence of sexual

body parts will be conducted comparing these features on female characters to their male

counterparts. Each analysis will consider broader cultural implications and contexts for each

examined portrayal. The YouTube series *Tropes vs. Women in Games* (2013-2017) breaks down

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[62] Lynch et al., 581.
[63] Malkowski and Russworm, 3.

a few broad categorizations by which female game characters' roles and positions are understood: damsel in distress, woman as reward for the male character, woman as background decoration, 'Ms. Male Character,' the lady sidekick, and sinister seductresses.[64] I will use these categories as tools to understand female game narrative structures to examine past gaming trends and compare them with more recent trends in in-depth textual analyses. A brief sampling of popular past games are compared to more detailed analyses of contemporary games, hopefully establishing evidence for an evolution in narrative trends. This study seeks to explore potential evidence for an arc in the changing of female narrative representation and to provide further insight on how to achieve representation of female characters that stands on equal ground with that of male characters.

I will offer case studies of the games: *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (1996-2013), *Bayonetta* (2009), *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017), and *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017). I selected these titles because they are critically "popular" AAA studio games (except *Hellblade*, which is from an independent sub-studio of a AAA company), and because the stories of most of these games typically feature female characters in primary and positive roles and have protagonists that challenge the heteronormative masculine norm. I selected *Tomb Raider* (1996-2013) and *Bayonetta* (2009), however, was selected because these games have often been referenced as examples of positive female representation in video games (and is given credit for the inclusion of female heroes in games), but there are problems with placing these games firmly within that category. The titular character and protagonist of each series, Lara Croft and Bayonetta respectively, unfortunately

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[64] Sarkeesian, Anita, *Tropes vs. Women in Games*. Feminist Frequency (YouTube.com, 2013-2017).

still retain some of the more problematic and stereotypical female tropes.[65] In addition, I selected

two games from the *Dragon Age* series due to both their status as a traditional RPG (role-playing

game), as well as the fact that the narratives and representations included in the series show a

clear arc of evolution towards inclusive representation. These RPGs are also unique in that

players have the option of choosing whether or not their 'avatar' (in-game protagonist character)

is female or male. Finally, I selected the latter two titles based on their recency and the fact that

players have no option but to play as a non-sexualized female protagonist through a narrative

that revolves entirely around said female protagonist and her experience(s).

Lastly, I will note that the games I examine in this study are selected for their heavy

reliance on narrative, as well as for being more well-known (and thus arguably more culturally

relevant). There are several indie game titles that feature female leads who break several of the

established masculine-centric tropes, such as *Aquaria* (2007), *Transistor* (2014), *The Song of the

Deep* (2016), and *Night in the Woods* (2017). While these games depict exemplary narratives and

well-rounded characters, they are not as well-known and thus perhaps not as reflective of larger-

scale cultural change. This is not to suggest that indie games have not contributed positively to

the environment of the gaming community. Indeed, the argument could be made that indie games

are where diverse representation really began, and that these games were the first places in which

such representation was allowed by their studios. However, this thesis is concerned with

exploring large-scale outcomes of changes within the gaming communities, and how, if at all,

larger studios have begun to adopt diverse representation based on changing cultural climates.

In acknowledging video games as a form of culturally representative literature, it is

possible to begin to establish narrative trends and patterns within games themselves, as well as to

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[65] Jansz, Jeroen and Raynel G. Martis, "The Lara Phenomenon: Powerful Female Characters in Video Games" *SR* 56, (2007):141-48.

begin to establish what makes a game's narrative structure different from that of more traditional texts, like novels. Adopting the stance of video games as representative literature allows for studies on interpretive meanings of video games, and how the medium constructs a story-world and characters. Furthermore, it allows for the exploration of full socio-cultural implications, especially in instances where a game is considered popular. However, it is not within the scope of this study to fully address and speak to how games should be studied and interpreted. Instead, this study will attempt to establish how games have historically and contemporaneously represented women in narratives, while operating under the assumption that games are texts. I argue, that video games are an influential part of their cultural contexts that can feed into socio-cultural attitudes, rhetoric, and discourse. With Ian Bogost, I acknowledge that:

> Games are something more than nondescript vessels that deliver varying dosages
> of video pleasure. They include characters and personas with whom we can
> identify and empathize, like we might do with a novel or film. They are composed
> of forms and designs derived from whole cloth, producing visual, tactile, and
> locomotive appeal like fashion or painting or furniture. They insert themselves
> into our lives, weaving within and between our daily practices, both structuring
> and disrupting them. They induce feelings and emotions in us, just as art or music
> or fiction might do.[66]

Games hold potential for changing cultural conversations. As Salen and Zimmerman argue, "games are social contexts for cultural learning. This means that games are one place where the values of society are embodied and passed on. Games help to instill or fortify a culture's value

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[66] Bogost, Ian, *How to Talk About Video Games*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), ix.

system."[67] Representations of female and minority groups in games can be either positive or detrimental to the cultural atmosphere depending on how they are conducted. As witnessed in Gamergate, video games have far-reaching effects on society as a whole. It then becomes imperative to understand how games could be perceived and understood at a cultural level by examining them closely as texts.

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[67] Salen and Zimmerman, 516.

II.   Defining Terms of Narrative Games: Avatars, Empathy, and Immersion

The games I examine in this study employ narrative techniques to construct immersive story-worlds with fully realized and engaging characters (both primary and secondary). "Narrative" in this sense can be loosely understood as "plot" and as a succession of events that the player has to perform in a certain order, while "story" refers to the fictional worlds projected by video games.[68] In many games, such as the ones selected for this study, "story and game are not opposed to each other, but merged in a unique combination,"[69] and have, as Atkins puts it, "a central narrative impetus, that develop story over time, rather than simply repeat with minimal difference in a move from level to level of increasing excess."[70] This view resolves tensions present within narratology vs. ludology debates, as these two schools of thought are often seen as being oppositional to one another, with the former focusing solely on narrative connotations, and the latter on games as play objects.

In video games, gameplay "takes place within a representational universe, filled with depictions of objects, interactions, and ideas out of which a player makes meaning and they can represent by creating depictions of characters, stories, settings, ideas, and behaviors which are experienced through play."[71] The goal in games is to immerse the player in a detailed and investing story-world, with different parameters and mechanics than other, more traditional forms of literature.[72] A key term to consider is that of 'interactive fiction.' Nick Montfort argues that games are a type of interactive fiction, as most video games feature "a story that emerges as

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[68] Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 203.
[69] Ibid., 224.
[70] Ibid., 225.
[71] Salen and Zimmerman, 364.
[72] Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 228-29.

a result of interaction."[73] Interactivity in this sense refers to physical actions/mechanics of gameplay which allow the player to "experience" the evolution of the story and story-world. That being said, different games rely on different degrees of narrative interaction and narrative immersion. Most modern video games have a present amount of fictional framework and story-world: "in the beginning of video game history, only text adventures could be said to [fully] integrate stories and games; but nowadays there is no popular [game] genre that does not use some sort of fictional framework."[74] In other words, "narrative games" require players to participate in and interact with the game's story in order to advance (or 'win').

However, not all games contain a heavy story-base. There is a marked difference in games that merely *have* a story and story-world, versus those that are *driven* by their stories/narratives. For instance, fighting style games such as the *Mortal Kombat* (1992-2019) series and the *Super Smash Bros.* (1998-2018) series have background plots and are set in a fictional world, but the story in games like these functions mostly as an impetus for the player to advance through and unlock all playable fighter characters. These characters are then used in the player vs. player/computer combat modes which are the main highlighted function of these types of games: "some fighting games have a 'story mode' option, but the stories offered are very thin and lack [character] development in role and position."[75] There are also player vs. player games like *Team Fortress 2* (2007) and *Overwatch* (2016), where characters have narratives and the game takes place in a fictional world. However, in these games, and in *Overwatch* (2016) specifically, the story is not made available through gameplay, but by outside franchise materials

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[73] Montfort, Nick, "Interactive Fiction as 'Story,' 'Game,' 'Storygame,' 'Novel,' 'World,' 'Literature,' 'Puzzle,' 'Problem,' 'Riddle,' and 'Machine'" in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 310-18.
[74] Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 203.
[75] Jansz and Martis, 144.

such as comics and short videos. Whereas action-adventure games and RPGs (i.e. the genres of the games examined in this study) rely on using fictional elements and techniques to fully immerse and invest the player in gameplay, through their mechanical elements (like cutscene 'decision points' and dialogue choice).

Henry Jenkins classifies game narratives into four broad narrative categories: 1) Evoked Narratives: "video games [that] reproduce a world that is known to players through other works of fiction, so that the games are part of an encompassing system of meanings (example: *Blade Runner*); 2) Enacted Narratives: "the story itself may be structured around the character's movement through space and the features of the environment may retard or accelerate plot trajectory; these games are those that privilege spatial exploration over plot development; 3) Embedded Narratives: "the gamespace becomes a memory palace whose contents must be deciphered as the player tries to reconstruct the plot" (i.e. adventure games where players "encounter a world of clues that have to be deciphered to find out a story that has already happened"); and 4) Emergent Narratives: "where gamespaces are designed to be rich with narrative potential, enabling the story-constructing activity of players; the gamespace is filled with independent objects so that player interaction with these objects creates unique events."[76] The games examined in this study will be those that can best be described as 'emergent narratives' (except *Hellblade*, which functions as an enacted/embedded narrative), as games that fits within this category can allow players to 'create' their own story, and thus depend on high levels of player immersion. Rouse describes an immersive game as one where narrative is well-integrated with gameplay. In other words, these games are ones that rely heavily on in-game

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[76] Jenkins, Henry, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 118-130; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 227.

story-telling (like creating believable, or realistic, worlds and engaging characters) to invest the

player in plot outcomes.[77]

In the case of RPGs and adventure games in particular (though with other genres as well),

developers are concerned with immersing the players through cultivation of a sense of empathy

and emotional connection. At the 2018 East Coast Gaming Conference in Raleigh, North

Carolina USA, Heidi McDonald gave a talk that described how developers can better use and

cultivate empathy in their games, where she defined the key goal of any game as "making

players care."[78] The aim of developers is to make players become invested in (care about) their

story and gameplay. She then defined two key concepts for developers and writers to keep in

mind when working on a game title: resonance and relatability of characters. In order to make a

game resonate with players, McDonald urged developers to remember the "universality of

emotions," or emotions and experiences that every player will be familiar with to some degree,

and to use them in the construction of their narrative arcs. She listed examples like conflict,

community, family, and loss as emotional themes that elicit sympathy for a large number of

players. Speaking at the same conference, developer Alexander Horn went further in defining

best practices for developers in making an emergent narrative.[79] He advised developers to allow

their narratives to evolve and change as the player experiences the game. He argued that

immersion can be better achieved by using mechanics that a player can use to 'shape' their own

game-story, like using dialogue wheels, presenting bulkier narrative content early in the game,

allowing ambiguity in the narrative, and limiting explicit narrative content so that what is present

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[77] Rouse, R, *Game Design: Theory and Practice* (Plano, TX: Wordware, 2001).

[78] McDonald, Heidi, "The Role of Narrative in Games in Promoting Empathy and Kindness" at ECGC 2018. (Raleigh, NC: April 18th, 2018).

[79] Horn, Alexander, "Best Practices in Emergent Narrative Design" at ECGC 2018 (Raleigh, NC: April 19th, 2018).

has appropriate impact on the player's response. Both developers stressed that immersive games rely a good deal on cultivating empathy, collaboration between players and the story, and allowing players to have agency in how the story unfolds.

Agency, like immersion, is one of several mechanic and technical elements, or games schemas, that video games use. These "normative schemas enable readers to 'lose' themselves in the text in an immersive, affective experience" and such an experience produces a "pleasure of immersion that stems from our ability to take guided action and see the outcomes from our choice of one or more scripts within a single schema."[80] Such mechanics (or schemas) are common across most action-adventure games and RPGs, and include the player: choosing dialogue, creating an avatar, making choices that affect how the story advances, choosing whether or not to engage with environmental NPCs (non-playable characters), and using relatively short cinematic cutscenes. Dialogue is often presented either in list form, or in the form of a dialogue wheel where choices are coded with a specific emotional tone, such as anger or sarcasm. These tones help shape the player-character's personality and can affect how other characters react to them). Figures 2.1 and 2.2 show an example of a dialogue wheel in an in-game cutscene sequence and an explanation of available tone choices (the images were taken from two games from the studio BioWare).

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[80] Douglas, J. Yellowlees and Andrew Hargadon, "The Pleasures of Immersion and Interaction: Schemas, Scripts, and the Fifth Business" in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 196.
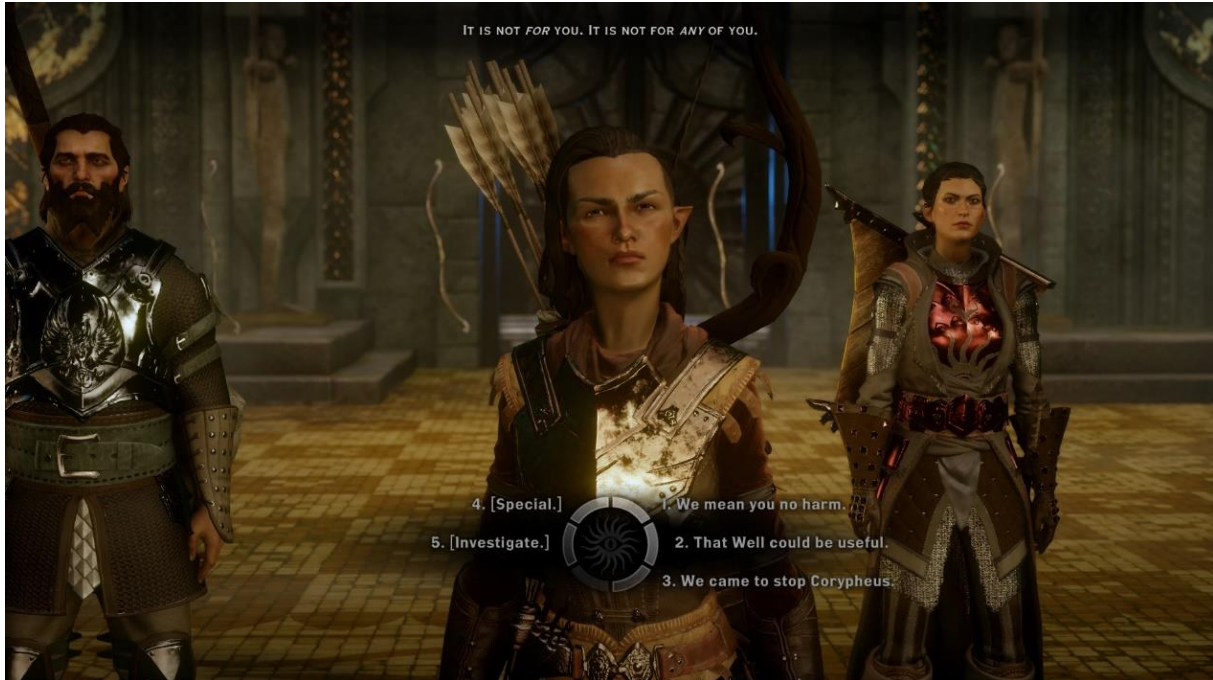
Figure 2.1. "*Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) Dialogue Wheel." BioWare. March 16, 2016. Digital Image. Sourced from: Fextralife.com via http://i.imgur.com/dUQxwk9.jpg
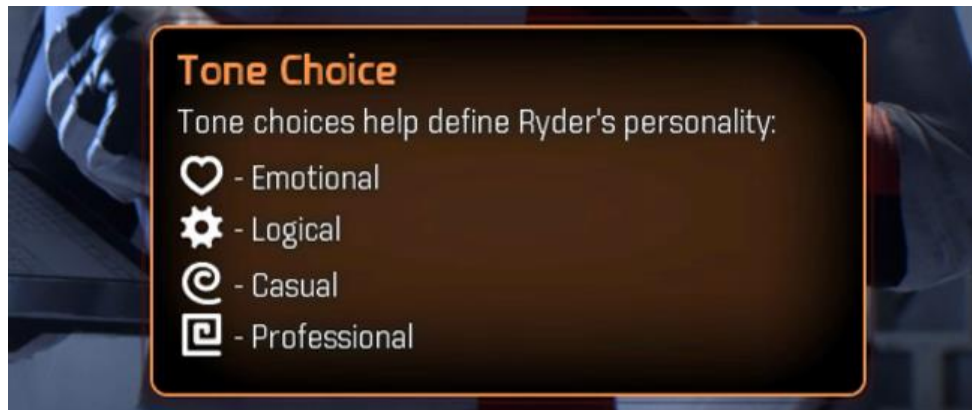
Figure 2.2. "Tone Choice in *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017)." BioWare. March 22nd, 2017. Digital Image. Sourced from: https://bit.ly/2HZz81G

Cutscenes are relatively short cinematic sequences which relay important narrative information to players without requiring explicit narrative content. During them, play is paused, and game characters interact with each other, or a pre-set plot event occurs. Cutscenes introduce narrative in a variety of ways: they create a central narrative tension, shape the narrative in a certain direction, compensate for missing narrative (i.e. passage of time), associate the game with contemporary cinema aesthetics to build emotional tension, and provide the player with

information that can then affect their play choices.[81] Where dialogue choice and plot-choice give

player an amount of agency over the narrative, cutscenes serve to invest the player fully with the

narrative through emotional aesthetics. These in-game moments and mechanics illustrate a high

level of authorial control over gameplay, as these sequences help immerse the player through

emotional investment in characters and situations, often by allowing the player to choose how

the protagonist responds. In turn, player choices then often (especially in RPGs) afffects how the

plot of the game unfolds (which leads to players 'unlocking' different pre-set endings). The goal

for developers is to have players 'move' through the narrative without feeling as if they were

forced (Nielsen calls this the "problem of linearity"): "to have players move thorough the game

in a particular way while making sure it is interesting."[82] The agency of the player, therefore, is

key in an immersive experience.

The development of immersive and investive narrative games depends on integrating the

player as much as possible with the events and characters of the story-world, while ensuring that

the scripted plot is advanced as organically as it can be. RPGs (such as the *Dragon Age* titles

examined in this study) add further mechanics that cultivate investment and immersion. In these

types of RPGs, players create a character, by modifying the appearance of a pre-set model that is

then inserted into the gameworld as its protagonist. This character operates as a blank slate, with

players dictating their appearance, speech, and actions towards plot events, which can then

potentially change plot outcomes in a branching narrative structure as opposed to a more

traditional linear plot structure. Players have the ability to 'create' different stories as they go.

Not all games operate under a branching structure, and thus do not give players agency over plot

outcomes. Figure 2.3 gives an example of a linear narrative game structure compared to a

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[81] Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 203.
[82] Ibid., p. 211.

branching narrative structure, where all choices lead back to two main endings (however, some

games may have a few ending options). Figure 2.4 is an example of a decision-point in the game

Dragon Age: Inquisition (2014), in which the player-character decides whether or not to let a

secondary character named Cole work with them.
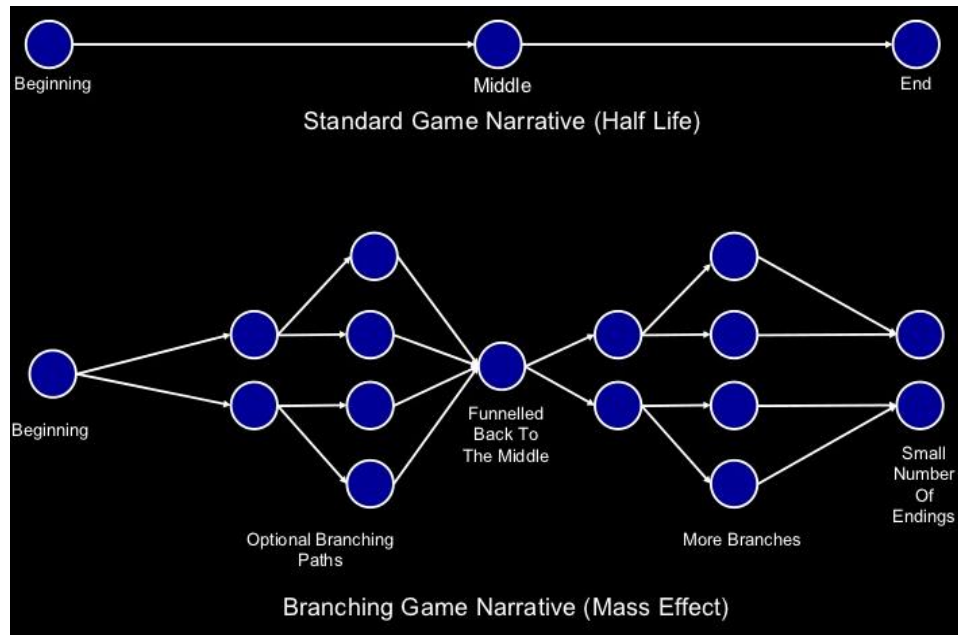
Figure 2.3. Standard vs. Branching Game Narrative. Tom Cole. 2014. Digital Image.
Sourced from: http://tommakesgames.com/wp/2014/12/branching-narrative-real-
wanted-possible-2/
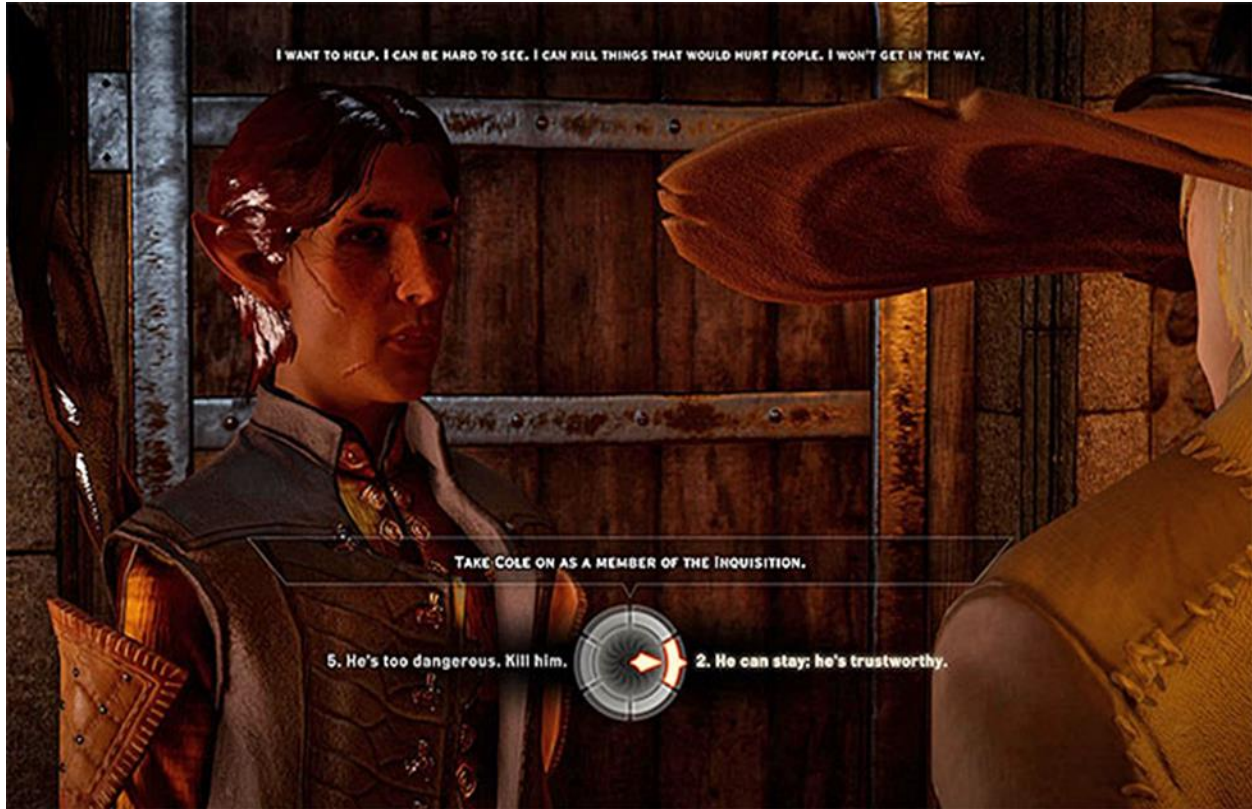
Figure 2.4. Decision Point. Gamepressure.com. Digital Image. Sourced from: https://guides.gamepressure.com/dragonageiii/gfx/word/531986481.jpg

Rouse defines games that use mechanics such as the ones mentioned as using in-game story telling by creating scenes and worlds that give characters full and complete context for the plot, as well as engaging and believable secondary characters.[83] In other words, "for in-game storytelling, players get to experience the story themselves instead of being told it secondhand,"[84] unlike in more traditional narrative genres, thus maintating the sensation of emotional investment and/or immersion for the player.

Immersion and emotional investment/empathy are further supported in game narratives when video games use 'avatars' (constructed characters are a type of avatar). The avatar is synonymous with the player-character/protagonist and is representative of all the players'

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[83] Rouse, 227.
[84] Ibid., 227.

actions. Simply, avatars are "inhabitable protagonists."[85] The avatar is unique in that it becomes

a fictional stand-in for the players themselves: "the player moves through the game world taking

actions as this person, adopting his or her concerns and struggling towards his or her goals."[86] In

a way, what happens to the avatar is also simultaneously happening to the player. Avatars are

unique in that they are "simultaneously both subject and object: on one hand they are a mask to

be worn, and on the other, they are a tool to view and manipulate."[87] Over the course of

gameplay, players extend themselves further into the motivations and the visceral, cognitive,

social, and fantasy possibilities of the avatar, forging an identification grounded in observation as

well as action and experience."[88] The avatar represents the player 'merged' with the protagonist

character. It allows players to "construct their identities in relation to the gameworld."[89] For the

purposes of this study, the concept of games having the potential to fully immerse players in a

world, and the mindset of a character reacting to that world, has implications for female

representation. There is a potential for games, through narrative and immersion techniques, to

evoke a sense of empathy and understanding of challenges that are unique to women,

implications and realities of sexism, and various other social justice issues if the narrative is so

structured: "Games put culture at 'play,' not just reflecting culture, but shifting between and

among existing cultural structures—sometimes transforming them as a result. Transformative

cultural play occurs when the open system quality of a game leads to an exchange between

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[85] Isbister, Katherine, *How Games Move Us: Emotions by Design* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017).
[86] Ibid., 11.
[87] Salen and Zimmerman, 526.
[88] Isbister, Katherine, *Better Game Characters by Design: A Psychological Approach* (Boca Raton, FL: Morgan Kaufmann, 2006); Isbister, *How Games Move Us,* 11.
[89] Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 209.

meanings of a game and culture at large, changing the context of the game."[90] For instance in both of the BioWare RPG series *Mass Effect* (2007-2017) and *Dragon Age* (2009-2014), players are able to explore and experience the nuances of complex social issues and situations (such as racism and xenophobia) through plot points, immersion as a non-human player character (that is exposed to the realities of racism and xenophobia), and through interactions with NPCs. Narrative driven games allow the space for full and complete character development and emotional investment in characters and their situations, both on the part of the protagonist and the characters the protagonist interacts with.

There is vast potential for immersive narrative games to influence emotion and social connection.[91] There is the possibility for games to tackle contemporary social issues, as well as (depending on plot points and events of the narrative) foster diverse narratives which can impart a sense of empathy with marginalized groups and could normalize diverse presences within gaming culture. Katherine Isbister asserts "when desginers offer interesting choices and keep players in flow, they are able to start evoking another class of feelings in their players—the rich social emotions we experience in relation to others" and can "amplify identification with the virtual people and situations."[92] Astrid Ensslin takes this argument further:

> Literary gaming (as well as other forms of art games) implements Bogost's (2007) concept of procedural rhetoric in that it invokes artefacts—part game, part digital literature—that are persuasive. Their ideological ludic mechanics and semiotic structures are designed in such a way that they afford and demand critical, reflexive, and meditative play; and seek to persuade the player, through

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[90] Salen and Zimmerman, 517, 554.
[91] Horn, "Best Practices in Emergent Narrative Design."
[92] Isbister, 7.

algorithmically grounded interactions, to understand and internalize their artistic

and aesthetic message.[93]

Games have the unique ability to allow their creators to have their narratives participate in larger

social conversations and contexts, while also imparting their own messages. Games allow

players an experience that can impart both emotional and social wisdom as actors that affect

outcomes of stories; in films and novels, this connection is different. For in traditional mediums,

readers are witnesses instead of actors and the "game experience allows a person to 'transform'

into someone else for the experience, an experience which offers a multitude of variations on a

theme that the player can exhaustively explore to gain an understanding of the theme."[94] As

agents of the narrative, players are actively participating and affecting change in any social

discourse present in game narratives. Avatars are especially important in the sense that

"inhabiting the avatar's social persona allows the player to try out social qualities and situations

they may not normally possess (providing a 'social level' of experience)."[95] My analyses focus

on looking at the plot (or larger story) of the game in relation to the player.

With the current gaming social climate involving the rampant sexism, racism, and

misogyny perpetuated by Gamergate, game narratives could be used to potentially combat the

prejudiced views of proponents of Gamergate and allow players to enter into (or act on) a broad

social conversation. Games can then be analyzed contextually to the social climates in which

they are created, as they could perpetuate social learning in their narratives. Game characteristics

have the potential to allow players to gain empathy for real-world social situations that they may

[93] Ensslin, 36.
[94] Mateas, Michael, "A Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games" *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game,* ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004).
[95] Isbister, K., *How Games Move Us*, 11.

not otherwise be familiar with, such as the experiences of marginalized groups. Immersive game narratives then can use both the overarching narrative of the game, as well as the position of the player-character/avatar to further socio-cultural understanding in the real-world. Thus, if games present well-rounded and realistic female characters that are non-stereotypical (especially playable protagonists), there is the potential for advancing social understanding within game communities, and they may be able to help circumvent some of the more problematic attitudes within gaming culture like the ones that fueled Gamergate and still persist today.

III.   Video Games and Female Representation: Categories, History, and Implications

        Games feature several types of characters crucial for understanding player experience that can be categorized in a variety of ways: based on their function, how much the player can interact with them, and/or how much the player can identify with them.[96] A few such categories are: "stage characters (NPCs), functional stage characters (NPCs similar to stage character, but that serve a purpose; attacking the player or helping in a quest), cast characters (ones that influence plot; referred to in RPGs as the player-character' 'companions/team,' that have their own personalities and agendas), and the player character (actions are usually controlled by player, except sometimes during cutscenes; missions/quests are decided by game story)."[97] Just as there are many types of game narrative categories, there are many types of video game characters, each with their own purposes and characteristics. The player-character (or avatar), holds the purpose of directly influencing the players' immersion within the game-world, but NPCs and companion characters also play a significant role in the player's emotional investment and immersion. These characters also play an important role in immersing the player within the game world and narrative, much like the narrative schemas and mechanics explored in chapter II. Indeed, "characters in games are not just people who story is about, but also who make action happen, thus producing different stories."[98] Video game characters, including the protagonist or player character, play a large role in narrative development and can change a player's perception of narrative events, oftentimes acting as a driving narrative force.[99] For example the *Mass Effect* (2007-2017) series has players fight against a synthetic A.I. race known as the Geth across all

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[96] Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 209-10.
[97] Ibid., 209.
[98] Ibid., 209.
[99] Wolf, Mark J. P, *The Medium of the Video Game*. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001).

three titles, but in *Mass Effect 3* (2012), players gain a geth as a companion and then undertake a game quest that explains the origins of the geth, and suddenly they can no longer be seen as entirely evil, depending on how the player-character chooses to interact with him. The geth companion, Legion, not only provides an emotional backstory, but also cultivates empathy and engagement with the story-world, giving players an important layer of context. There is then a later game quest involving a war between the geth and another alien race known as the quarians (the quarians created the geth) where the player must choose either to allow the quarians to destroy the geth (and have a part in a genocidal war crime), allow the geth to kill the quarians, or attempt to broker peace between the two alien races. As Katherine Isbister puts it: "interactions with NPCs move players beyond 'para-social' feelings into consequential social experiences with accompanying social emotions and behaviors."[100] How the player interacts with Legion has major effects on the overall narrative development of the game and can thus change the interpretive meaning(s) of the story.

Background, functional, and cast video game characters enhance both player engagement and game plot. Often, they are the providers of quests to the player-character and have direct effects on the story. NPCs can be further understood by their positions in the narrative: helper, hinderer, beneficiary, neutral, or narrator.[101] To engage with games for their ability to subvert gendered tropes, as well as their potential for social awareness, all characters should be analyzed with their narrative impact and positionality in mind, with weight upon the protagonist. Avatars provide one level of identification for the player, and secondary NPCs/companions provide another. In fact, Isbister and Nolan's 2008 survey on emotionally impactful game sequences found that "the most frequently cited moments involved the death of NPCs with whom the

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[100] Isbister, *How Games Move Us*, 20.
[101] Wolf, 34.

players had spent considerable time during gameplay. Players wept over losing valuable and trusted companions."[102] Developers aim to cultivate emotional investment for player immersion, and two tools by which to do so is with identifiable characters and employing universal emotions in their narratives.[103]

In addition to hypermasculine male protagonists or hypersexualized female protagonists, secondary female NPCs and how they are presented narratively and visually can contribute to the problematic natures of many games. Emotional investment in all female characters have implication in the real world, especially as one study indicated that "data cautiously indicated that gender portrayals in video games can, in fact, affect people's beliefs about women in the real world, and women's self-efficacy. For women, playing the sexualized video game character resulted in lower confidence in their abilities to accomplish things but did not significantly reduce feelings of self-worth and liking among female players."[104] While it is beyond the scope of the study to argue this finding as definitive, the potential effect on women playing video games should be noted. In addition, "in two studies, it was found that the possibility to identify with a female protagonist or character contributed to girls' appreciation of video games."[105] How identifiable and engaging female characters are in games has a direct impact on the gender coding of a game space, something which bears an impact on the social climate of video games and video game culture. Currently, games are heavily masculine coded, something which, as mentioned in the introduction, can and does discourage women and girls from playing games. It is not a stretch to then assume that negative portrayals of women within video games can have

[102] Isbister, Katherine. "The Real Story on Characters and Emotions: Taking it to the Streets" at GDC 2008 (NYU Polytechnic Institute, 2008).
[103] McDonald, Heidi, 2018.
[104] Behm-Morawitz, Elizabeth and Dana Mastro, "The Effects of Sexualization of Female Video Game Characters on Gender Stereotyping and Female Self-Concept" *SR* 61, (2009): 808-23.
[105] Jansz, 142.

negative self-esteem effects on women in the real world.[106] By not including characters which

could immerse female players, games potentially alienate women, or at least risk having female

players not as invested in game plot. Teresa Lynch et al. point to several studies that found

"female participants consistently chose games featuring a nonsexualized rather than sexualized

female protagonists and expressed more interest in playing as the nonsexualized character."[107]

They go on to conclude: "women express a dislike of video games because the content seems

generally intended for heterosexual males. Second, adding female characters as sexual objects

marginalizes these characters in a way that women may view as derogating their in-group."[108]

Social identity theory[109] offers an explanation based on its stance that "group memberships form

based on perceived similarity between the self and others. Individuals desire to see their groups

cast in positive roles in media, because such portrayals foster a positive self-concept. Thus, when

women see repeated negative depictions of female characters in video games, they may avoid the

medium entirely."[110] Including sexualized female characters in itself holds the potential to

alienate and exclude women (and women-identified individuals) from participating in video

games and culture, which thus contributes to perpetuating the myth of games as a masculine only

space.

     The white male character is the 'neutral' and default figure in patriarchal societal

structures, and video games carry with them a reputation of adopting this assumption of white

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[106] Martins, Nicole et al., "A Content Analysis of Female Body Imagery in Video Games" *SR* 61, (2009):824-36.

[107] Lynch et al., 566.

[108] Ibid., 566.

[109] Hornsey, M.J, "Social Identity Theory and self-categorization theory: A historical review" *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2, no. 1 (2008), 204-222.

[110] Lynch, 566-67.

male as default (with anyone else being 'other').[111] In most video games, the only avatar

presented to players is a straight white male, and the assumption of this demographic as default

"makes it difficult for games to break out of the straight white male gaze."[112] One problematic

implication comes with the fact that the avatar is the agent of change and action and many

female characters do not have the same level of agency as the male protagonist. This constructs a

narrative that male characters are the more capable, and the agency of female characters becomes

contingent upon the actions of the male character. Thus, most games reinforce the stereotypical

and damaging heteronormative and patriarchal narrative that white males are the 'more capable'

group and allow players to 'act out' this narrative.

But perhaps more troubling are those concerns raised by a few sociological and

psychological studies that have found hypermasculine and sexualized portrayals in games and

media may produce cultivation effects: "research demonstrates that there is a significant

relationship between media exposure to modeled gender stereotypes and individuals'

stereotypical gender role beliefs and expectations (e.g. Herrett-Skjellum and Allen 1996;

Signorelli 1993)."[113] One such example of a potential cultivation effect is raised in Behm-

Morawitz's study: "video game portrayals of the female body, for example, may be used to help

form an individual's social and moral standards about gender-appropriate dress, ideal female

body-type, and even evaluations of female (self)worth."[114] Several other sociologists and

psychologists have dedicated research towards media effects on youth, but also on the projection

of problematic messages into the broader socio-cultural atmosphere. One of the more troubling

messages that video games have historically perpetuated is described by Karen E. Dill and her

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[111] Salter and Blodgett, 76.
[112] Ibid., 75.
[113] Behm-Morawitz and Mastro, 810.
[114] Ibid., 810.

colleagues in two separate studies: "Effects of exposure to sex-stereotyped video game characters on tolerance of sexual harassment" and "Violence, Sex, Race, and Age in Popular Video Games: A Content Analysis." Dill et al. state: "of all the forms of mass media popular with youth, video games perpetuate perhaps the most uniform and unsubtle sex role stereotypes."[115] But what Dill et al. point out in their studies is that video games often send messages that equate sex and violence (e.g. sexualized violence). For instance, they reference the game *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002) in which players are rewarded for "violence against women: if the male hero kills a prostitute after they have sex, he gets his money back. When a male character punches a female prostitute, she does not respond by screaming or saying 'no,'—negative responses likely to happen in real social situations—but rather is programmed to retort, 'I like it rough' and to punch back. Seventy-five percent of American boys under the age of 17 have played a *Grand Theft Auto* game."[116] The game series itself is infamous for portraying a glorification of violence, and violence against women; they encourage it. These types of portrayals in video games and other media have two-fold effects. On the one hand, "when women see women demeaned in the media, they are more accepting of dating violence, and when exposed to media images of highly physically attractive females caused them to downgrade their own desirability."[117] Problematic sexist depictions further acceptance of heteronormative and sex assault myths in women and girls that see them. It also affects males: "if a boy learns that males are powerful and dominant and women are objects to be subjected and used, these ideals will take root in his developing social conscience and broadly influence his

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[115] Dill, Karen E., Brian P. Brown, and Michael A. Collins, "Effects of exposure to sex-stereotyped video game characters on tolerance of sexual harassment" *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 44 (2008): 1402-08.

[116] Ibid., 1403.

[117] Ibid., 1403; Dill and Thill, 864-65.

attitudes and behaviors towards women"[118] and "males exposed to advertisements featuring women portrayed as sex objects subsequently show greater rape supportive attitudes (Lanis and Covell 1995). Dill 2007 found a positive correlation between violent video game playing and endorsement of rape myths, including the myths that women secretly want to be rapes and that sometimes women 'deserve' to be raped."[119] Hypersexual female characters in games and games that endorse violence against women are damaging on a real world level as Dill et al. argue: "sexual harassment is both a form of aggression against women and a form of gender discrimination and is a serious social problem. Given the popularity of video games, especially among young men, and the typicality of sex role stereotypes in games and game magazines, the effects are important."[120] Therefore, it becomes imperative to consider the effects of video game portrayals of both women and men, to examine what types of conversations they are contributing to, or perpetuating, especially as Behm-Morawitz and Mastro state "very little published research exists that analyzes the content of video game magazines in general or gender representations in specific."[121] Because though representation in game history is problematic, if games present appropriate and/or powerful female characters, they "may have a positive influence on male players in that they are much stronger and more powerful representations of women than is typical of many other media products. Exposure to powerful images may decrease the tendency to gender-stereotype based on appearance."[122] By exploring games that seem to have powerful representations, the conversation can be extended to illustrate the ways in which developers and games could change their overall message to something positive.

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[118] Dill et al., 2008, 1403.
[119] Dill and Thill, 853.
[120] Dill et al., 2008, 1407.
[121] Behm-Morawitz and Mastro, 853.
[122] Ibid., 820.

Representation of women and men in games is split along two lines: physical representation and narrative representation. In terms of physical representation, the trend has been for women to be depicted as highly sexualized when compared to their male counterparts and in keeping with the 'thin ideal' present in most media where 'fatness' is socially stigmatized.[123] Nicole Martin's study found that "women in video games had significantly larger heads, but smaller chest sizes, waists, and hips than the average American woman. This finding provides some empirical support for the notions that this medium is presenting female body shapes that conform to the thin-ideal observed within other mainstream media."[124] And, "in comparison to male characters, video games more frequently showed female characters in clothing that left them partially nude and inappropriately dressed for preformed tasks (i.e. fighting).[125] Narratively, women have been typically portrayed as secondary to male characters,[126] though as mentioned in the introduction, Jansz and Martis's 2007 study (like Lynch's larger sample analysis of 571 titles) found that may not be true for more recent popular game titles (their study was based on the analysis of 12 popular games). The results of their study are shown in figure 3.1, with a breakdown on rate of occurrence for characters' races, roles, positions, attire, body shape, and build.

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[123] Martins, 824-36.

[124] Ibid., 831.

[125] Lynch et al., 567.

[126] Further reading: Provenzo, Eugene F, *Video Kids: Making Sense of Nintendo* (Harvard University Press, 1991); Glaubke, Christina R. et al, "Violence, Gender, and Race in Video Games" (Oakland, CA: Children NOW, 2001); Dietz, Tracy, "An Examination of Violence and Gender Role Portrayals in Video Games: Implications for Gender Socialization and Aggressive Behavior" *SR* 38, no. 5 (2008): 425-42.

Variable	Category	Leading character			Supporting character		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Overall		6	6	12	7	3	10
Race	White	4	5	9	5	1	6
	African	1	1	2	1		1
	Latino/a					1	1
	Asian	1		1	1	1	2
Position	Dominant	6	6	12	3	2	5
	Equal				1	1	2
	Submissive				3		3
Role	Hero/in	5	6	11	1	1	2
	Friend				3	1	4
	Villain				1	1	2
	Tough	1		1			
	Victim				2		2
Attire	Sexy	1	4	5		1	1
	Ordinary	3	2	5	6	2	8
Body	Heavy				1		1
	Normal	2	2	4	4		4
	Thin	4	4	8	2	3	5
Build	Muscular	5	2	7	3	2	5
	Normal	1	4	5	4	1	5
Breasts	Large		5	5		2	2
	Normal		1	1		1	1
Buttocks	Large	2	5	7	1	2	3
	Normal	4	1	5	6	1	7

Figure 3.1. "Jansz and Martis 2007 Study Results". Jeroen Jansz and Raynel G. Martis. 2007. Print Image. Sourced from: *Sex Roles* 56, p. 147

The same study also noted that, while "quite a few women became leaders in the games, they continue to be presented in a sexualized way. As a result, these powerful women are depicted as sex objects as much as their predecessors were."[127] Male characters then, historically, are always the heroes (in a primary narrative position), while their physical appearance is hypermasculine and shows them as symbols of power, which also can affect male self-concept: "the exposure to *dominant* males damaged their view of their own desirability as a mate, which suggests an incentive for males to perform sex specific stereotypes (strength, dominance) to increase one's

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[127] Jansz and Martis, 145.

sense of social desirability."[128] As such, representations of both male and female characters impacts the message perpetuated in gaming culture.

As this study focuses on female representation, I will consider the above character categorizations. However, I acknowledge that portrayals of male characters can be equally problematic. In order to understand the tropes and traditions in regard to female representation, they can be broken down categorically for analysis. Anita Sarkeesian, and Jansz and Martis offer both narrative and visual categories for describing female video game characters. Jansz's and Martis's categories are focused on defining narrative roles and appearances, while Sarkeesian's focus on identifiable tropes that have occurred in many different games over the video game industry's history. Both methods of categorization allow for in-depth considerations of female characters, and what tropes and traditions could mean on a socio-cultural and textual level. Jansz's and Martis's categories are split based on role, position, attire, body shape, prominence of sexual body parts (breasts/buttocks), and body shape (build/proportions). Women in games are understood to be in either a dominant or submissive position (towards a character(s), potentially including a male protagonist), and operate in one or more of the following roles: helper, villain, hero, housewife, 'tough,' princess, mother, victim, and/or protagonist. I examine character attire in the context of the situations the female character is performing in, such as if she is fighting. Jansz and Martis suggest asking if the female character's clothing is appropriate for their performed task. Furthermore, they explain that body shape and prominence of sexual body parts go hand-in-hand, the main concern lies with whether or not their body shape is realistic and appropriate, or if it is heavily sexualized and conforming to the stereotypical 'thin body ideal.'

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[128] Dill and Thill, 853.

Comparisons should then also be made to male characters, to examine whether or not males are portrayed the same as females.

Sarkeesian's categories are in conversation with Jansz's and Martis's, and so can be taken in conjunction with them. Her categories of tropes mainly cover narrative considerations; however, she does also include physical appearance-based tropes and how they apply to narrative as well. There is a total of ten tropes she points to: damsel in distress/woman in the refrigerator, women as background decoration, Ms. Male Character, women as reward, lady sidekicks, sinister seductresses, women as exotic fantasy, lingerie as armor, serving the male gaze, and slender ladies. There is a lot to unpack in her series, not only based on the sheer number of tropes she explores, but also on the number of video games she references and includes as examples. Also further compounding her tropes is the fact that some of the character categories can blend into one another in some game titles, such as the damsel in distress and women as reward categories. However, the main conclusion is that her series points to a long tradition of games across all genres representing women in problematic ways, and the number of games where these problems occur only reinforces her point. Both Jansz's and Martis's, and Sarkeesian's categories serve as a framework for analyzing the games that will be considered in the case study chapter of this thesis.

I will combine their categorical frameworks with perspectives from common approaches to feminist narratology, such as the assumption that female plot features are different from male ones, and narrative patterns focus on female experience, both in environment and in body[129] and "that no representation (fictional or non-fictional) is ever neutral but instead will be related to

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[129] Page, 21-2.

ideological values of extra-textual context in a complicated and dialectical way."[130] In other words, "gender may influence the use that elements of plot structure are put to and any examination should be rooted in the analysis of particular texts and the values of specific contexts."[131] Since the nature of games communities and the game industry helped produce the attitudes that were illustrated in Gamergate, any game should be analyzed in regard to this context. As DeWinter and Kocurek state: "the eroticization of male violence feeds into gaming culture."[132] And further, the "narratives of platform video games often mirror the conventional division of roles between the sexes, and avatars' bodies in role-playing games frequently conform to Western beauty standards. Most video games can therefore be considered as 'technologies of gender' which contribute to reproducing, reinforcing, and naturalizing pre-existing beliefs about men and women."[133] A feminist perspective is then integral to the understanding of what the video games in this study mean in their contexts and I follow the assertion of Salter and Blodgett: "critical perspectives, such as feminist and queer theory, offer an approach to video games that can focus more attention on contexts and the lived experiences of those who engage with these games outside the dominant audience construction and make an argument for representation that takes seriously those perspectives."[134]

The case studies in this thesis seek to establish a narrative basis for the evolution of portrayals of female characters in games. In the introduction, I explained that Lynch et al.'s study found a decrease in the occurrence of sexualization (as of 2014) based upon a sample of 571

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[130] Ibid., 49.
[131] Ibid., 65.
[132] DeWinter and Kocurek, 62.
[133] Trépanier-Jobin, Gabrielle. (2017). "Video Game Parodies: Appropriating Video Games to Criticize Gender Norms" in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* ed. Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm. (Indiana University Press, 2017), 90-105.
[134] Salter and Blodgett, 94.

games, over a period of 31 years. However, in order to understand the changes that have

occurred and are illustrated in this study's sample of four games, in addition to the basic

analytical frameworks, a historical model must first be established. What follows is a brief

exploration of four of the more prevalent and pointed tropes Sarkeesian points to, with reference

to their occurrence in more popular and well-known titles. The narrow selection of four of her

categories was based on the limitations of this study, how well they apply to the games examined

in the case studies and based on their commonality across multiple game titles. These tropes are

considered alongside Jansz's and Martis's categories.

    a) **Damsel in Distress and/or Submissive/Dependent Female Characters**

    In brief, a damsel in distress is a female character in trouble or peril, that is then rescued

by a male character. As Sarkeesian explains, "this motif is common across many different types

of media, from US military WWII posters, to fairy tales, and to movies like *King Kong* and

Tarzan."[135] The same is true of many video game titles, most famously seen in Princess Peach

(or Princess Toadstool depending on the game) of the *Super Mario* (1985-2019) series and

Princess Zelda in *The Legend of Zelda* (1986-2017) series. Both princesses in every title of each

game in the series are kidnapped at the beginning of the game and it is up to the male protagonist

(the player), Mario and Link respectively, to save the princess. The "woman is reduced to a state

of helplessness, from which she requires rescuing by a typically male hero for the benefit of his

story arc"[136] while the female character's story and perspective is ignored. Neither one of the

princesses are playable characters in any of the main title games, and only become so in spinoffs

that feature many characters from the games, such as *Super Smash Bros.* and the *Mario Kart*

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[135] Sarkeesian, Anita, "Damsel in Distress: Part 1" *Tropes vs. Women in Games* Feminist
Frequency (YouTube.com, 2013).
[136] Ibid.

series. Neither character has any agency, and they are reduced to solely operating under a state of victimhood. In other words, the damsel trades disempowerment of female characters for the empowerment of male characters.[137] What is perhaps most problematic about this particular trope is the fact that the female characters end up becoming nothing more than a possession that was stolen from the protagonist, a goal to be achieved, and a prize to be won. Instead of being a subject, they quite completely become an object that is acted upon.[138] Further adding to the problematic nature of their narrative positions is the fact that both Mario and Link are known to be romantically invested with Peach and Zelda. This kind of romance is conditional to the female characters being disempowered.

Arguably, in the case of Princess Peach and Princess Zelda, their portrayals are relatively innocent, as the game is marketed towards audiences of all ages (the characters are cartoons) and steers clear of more 'adult' themes. But among Mature rated games, the portrayals of damsels in distress become increasingly problematic. In many instances their victimhood involves female life being traded for the development of the male character (i.e. 'the woman in the refrigerator). The female characters' deaths in certain games serve as nothing more than a motivation for the male character to complete his story arc. For instance, in *God of War* (2005) Kratos (the male protagonist) experiences the death of both his wife and daughter, but these events come relatively early in *his* character arc. Their deaths serve only as Kratos's motivations for rejecting the gods of Olympus and beginning the conflicts his story arc covers. The same basic plot structure also takes place in the game *Max Payne* (2001), with the death of the titular character's wife. Some games take these portrayals even further when they begin to show what Sarkeesian refers to as 'mercy killing.' In these instances, the protagonist murders a female character in peril

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[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid.

'for her own good.' One of the more violent examples comes from the game *Prey* (2006), in which a female character becomes heavily mutated and deformed, and the male protagonist is locked in a room with her until he shoots her in the face. And she must be shot in the face, the plot does not advance if she is shot anywhere else. Some games even feature female characters that beg or plead with the male character to preform violence on them, while they submissively accept their fate, and are then sometimes "brought back to themselves" in death.[139]

There is an even more sinister trope of a female character's damsel status, or victimhood, being sexualized and catered towards a male gaze. Sarkeesian points to the game *Double Dragon* (1987) where the character Marian is violently kidnapped, and as she's being taken away, her dress shifts to show her underwear as she's over the male character's shoulder, which thus conflates her victimhood to her sexuality. Indeed, many of these damsel characters (in Teen and Mature rated games) are pictured with sexualized features and clothing. The pairing of violence against women with sexualization is dangerous, due to the implications of the avatar character. As discussed in chapter II, players insert themselves into game narratives as the protagonist. To require or encourage the protagonist/player to preform violence against women can then normalize that sort of behavior and imagery in the real world.[140] There is a real and pervasive cultural problem of violence against women, and too many games have exploited it only to make a plot point for the male protagonist.

In summary, the damsel in distress character is entirely submissive and powerless in comparison to the male character—she is a victimized object. She is dependent upon him for her survival, and in some cases must be killed in order to advance the male character's plot. Such a trope reduces the state of women in video games to a victim status, entirely without their own

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[139] Ibid.
[140] Dill et al., 1402-4.

agency. Further, Sarkeesian suggests that this trope in particular reinforces toxic and paternalistic attitudes and feeds into the old-world belief that women need to be sheltered and taken care of by men. What the trope does is reinforce notions of a male-hero power-fantasy. And even when (as Sarkeesian points out) the male character is imprisoned in these same game titles with a damsel character(s), he is capable of escaping by his own skills and smarts. In every situation, the male character is the dominant and capable character, where female characters remain disempowered and dependent.

b) 'Lingerie as Armor'/Appearance: Character Attire, Body Build, and Shape

Another prevalent trend is for female characters to be hypersexualized—the focus is on their bodies' sexual characteristics—typically by wearing 'armor' or clothing akin to lingerie, or that otherwise is not suitable for their preformed tasks (i.e. a bare stomach/chest for a character in a fighting role). The trend affects both female protagonists, RPG characters, fighting game characters, and NPCs/secondary characters. For instance, the titular protagonist character Bayonetta is seen in Figure 3.2 in skin-tight clothing that exposes her back and the majority of her thighs, as she faces away from the viewer, thus putting viewing focus away from her face (note that her heels have guns serving as the 'heel' portion of the shoes).

Figure 3.2. "Bayonetta in her 'armor'" Brittany Vincent. Feb. 28th, 2018. Digital Image. Sourced from: https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/bayonetta-is-now-nintendos-coolest-female-character

Importantly, the same types of armor are not seen on male characters in the same games; they have armor that is appropriate for their in-game tasks and does not sexualize them towards a 'female gaze.' Game protagonists are often performing physically demanding and otherwise dangerous tasks and would thus need clothing that is both practical and protective in the context of their situation. Figure 3.3 shows the same armor set ('Dalish Leather Armor') on a female protagonist character and a male protagonist character. The male character's body is covered, but the female character is wearing what looks like a sports bra, and her stomach, back, and chest are exposed.

Figure 3.3. "Dalish Leather Armor: Female vs. Male Character" *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009). Dragon Age Wiki. Digital Images. Sourced from: https://dragonage.fandom.com/wiki/Dalish_Leather_armor_set

Sexualized female bodies are found not only in the games themselves, but also are prominently featured both on the cover art for games, and in gaming advertisements (such as those found in gaming magazines: ex *PC Gamer*). One 2007 study that examined 225 game covers found that "males were twice as likely to appear on game covers than females were and were almost always the central figure(s)" and that "in the relatively rare cases where women were portrayed as central, or wielding the violent power video games offer, this role almost always came with exaggerated sexuality."[141] For gaming magazines, representation is much the same as it is in video game advertisements. Male characters were found to be much more central and present, and when female characters were present, they were highly likely to be sexualized (in a study conducted of company official magazines over a period of 3 years).[142] Having characters with sexualized outfits contributes to the trend of hyper-sexualization of female characters. In itself, having a female character that is a sexual agent is not inherently bad. It is entirely possible for a well-rounded female character to be 'sexy.' However, it becomes problematic when their sexualized features are made the center of attention, with many games featuring cut-scenes in which the camera zooms-in on sexual areas of the female character's body, which thus offers these characters for consumption by the male gaze and subverts any power they might have had as a free agent. Furthermore, as Sarkeesian's series points out, the problem with this trope is that oftentimes female empowerment and female sexualization/objectification become conflated.[143] Often, the character's sexualization is misconstrued as positive, as the character 'owning' her sexuality and body (i.e. rejecting the

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[141] Burgess, Melinda C. R, "Sex, Lies, and Video Games: They Portrayal of Male and Female Characters on Video Game Covers" *SR* 57 (2007):419-33.

[142] Miller and Summers, 733-42.

[143] Sarkeesian, Anita, "Lingerie is not Armor" *Tropes vs. Women in Games* Feminist Frequency (YouTube.com,2016).

prescribed 'innocent ideal'). Such a pairing reinforces the problematic heteronormative notion that women can only be powerful if they are sexualized.

These characters often serve as nothing more than gratification for the gaze of a straight male audience, as best illustrated via cutscenes. One telling example comes from the game *Bayonetta 2* (2014). In the opening sequence, the first camera shots pan slowly over Bayonetta's partially exposed chest, between her legs, around her thighs, and then her back without ever showing her face. The focus in the scene is only on Bayonetta's body (and its sexual features) and nothing more, which sets her up as a character whose value comes from her sexualization. In fact, in gameplay, Bayonetta's attack sequences are heavily sexualized; she uses objects based off BDSM and one attack sequence in particular requires Bayonetta to be naked (in the game, her hair is her armor, and when she attacks with her hair, her clothes come off). The game links key aspects of Bayonetta's power with her sexuality. Characters like Bayonetta appear powerful, however, the camera subverts their power by making them objects of the male gaze, and thus they become fetishized and any power they possess is subverted.

The problem with this trope is that it feeds into socio-cultural assumptions that women are only powerful in their sexual value, or their ability to attract men. It adheres to the false virtue/purity vs. sin/whore patriarchal dichotomy that makes women's value equal their appearance and whether or not they act upon their sexuality. These female characters are powerful, but that power is a threat to patriarchal order as it usurps male dominance. Thus, when the cameras in games objectify the bodies of their female characters, they are subverting that female power and re-establishing male dominance.

    c) Ms. Male Character

The first two tropes both apply female characters to lesser textual and visual positions than their male counterparts. The Ms. Male Character trope, however, involves a female protagonist character that is the gender-bent version of a male character. Simply put, they are the 'female version' of a previously established male character. These characters only exist in relation to their male counterparts and were not made with their own story in mind. Games that do so have the effect of dividing a particular character among gendered lines for players—the female character is for girls and the male character is for boys—and these ideas are reinforced with promotional material. The most famous example is the first playable female character, Ms. Pac-man from the 1981 arcade game of the same name. To create her, stereotypically feminine features were added to the pixelated figure of Pac-man: a pink bow, eyelashes, red lipstick, and a beauty mark. The differences in the in-game appearance are shown in figure 3.4, side by side with the Ms. Pac-man art on the arcade machine itself. Of note is that the machine art of Ms. Pac-man invokes pin-up portraits and features one of the ghosts (the enemies in the game) staring up at Ms. Pac-man with its mouth open.

Figure 3.4. "Ms. Pac-man and Pac-man" TheBishboyo1. Digital Screenshots. Sourced from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXpWDA8-XyQ

The trend of adding stereotypically female colors (like pink and pastels) to already established male characters is pervasive across many game titles, some of which are listed in Sarkeesian's series. The developers use the same character model but add things like the color pink or makeup to differentiate the characters, as seen in *Ms. Pac-Man* (1981), the *Sonic* franchise (the characters Sonic and Amy Rose), and the *Super Mario* franchise (the characters Toad and Toadette). For these female characters, their most defining characteristics become stereotypes of femininity. In addition, "the Ms. Male Characters set up a restrictive dichotomy, in that the male characters are seen as the 'norm' whereas the female characters are a deviation from that "norm."[144] These characters are often created only based on a desire to draw the market of female players, as Bogost explains of Ms. Pac-Man's origins: "women, it turned out, loved Pac-Man, and Midway theorized that making the main character female would only accelerate the game's certain success."[145] These female characters are based upon monetary value, not desire over creating a separate and detailed female character. There are also problems with this portrayal as it contributes to the dichotomy that has been set up by referring to certain games as "girl games." In gaming communities, this is a derogatory term, and seeks to place judgement on female players for not playing games that 'require skill.' The assumption is the myth that female players are 'casual' gamers, and not 'true' gamers, therefore, they do not have the same set of skills that the 'true' gamers do. This is a form of identity-policing that takes place within gaming communities both in categorizing games as feminized (and therefore 'weak,' 'casual,' or 'easy') and by judging women's skills while playing: "women's in-game failure is often ascribed to

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[144] Sarkeesian, Anita, "Ms. Male Character" *Tropes vs. Women in Games* Feminist Frequency (YouTube.com, 2013).
[145] Bogost, 39.

gender, and their successes are ascribed to some man—a boyfriend, a brother—who played on their account or to men who have 'gone easy' on them. Women are not seen as gamers."[146] By constructing game characters whose existence is conditional to the male characters', and also setting up a dichotomy of boy and girl games, video games contribute to these problems facing women and girls in gaming communities.

d) Sinister Seductresses/Sexualized Female Villains

The key features of the sinister seductress characters are the use of their sexuality to pose a danger to typically male characters. Their attractiveness becomes a 'trap' into which the male protagonist can fall, and so then becomes victimized. The female characters deceive that male characters by using their sexuality to lure male characters into a false sense of security. This trope demonizes female sexuality and turns it into something to be feared. Sarkeesian states: "it's a false notion of female sexuality rooted in ancient misogynistic ideas of women as deceptive and evil."[147] It paints female sexuality as something inherently deceptive. Due to the coding of these characters as 'the female threat' once the protagonist defeats the villain, many games make it clear that the male character has reasserted his masculine dominance. These notions reinforce historically problematic heteronormative ideals that define female sexuality as something to be feared and controlled, such as the virgin vs. whore value judgement ascribed to women in which purity is good and 'submissive,' where female sexual agency is 'evil' and a usurpation of rules. In some cases, this is literal. Sarkeesian references many games in which the villain (or boss) is a female monster whose sexual body parts are twisted and made grotesque. Doing so makes these character's female-ness dangerous and repugnant.

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[146] DeWinter and Kocurek, 64-65.
[147] Sarkeesian, Anita, "Sinister Seductresses" *Tropes vs. Women in Games, Season 2* Feminist Frequency (YouTube.com, 2016).

Often, too, these tropes require players to enact violence against sexualized women, thus usurping any power the female character may have had. For instance, Sarkeesian points to a particularly explicit example in the game *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow 2* (2014). In it, the male protagonist ends a key fight scene by impaling the sexualized female villain through the mouth; killing her in a graphically sexualized way. Again, like the damsel in distress category, the sinister seductress trope often presents the dangerous correlation of sex and violence. And with the seductress, male players are allowed to physically dominate the dominant female character. These female characters are the 'other' that are attacking the space of the male characters, and often, the male character is cast as the only hope for the game world. Gaming culture is unwelcoming, and often antagonistic, towards marginalized groups. And with the consideration that "US culture eroticized male dominance, which puts women in a subordinate position and increases acceptance of rape and sexual aggression" when games allow players to enact graphically sexualized violence (like impaling a female game character through the mouth and killing her), "has real implications for people's tolerance of and even actions in support of sexual aggression towards women."[148] These attitudes contribute to the types of threats that were levelled against the women attacked in Gamergate; they, like in Zoë Quinn's case, often involved sexually violent threats. In other words, video games that do so are (whether they intend to or not) contributing to rape culture. Indeed, "rape and rape culture have always been ways of policing women and demarcating spaces where women are permitted"[149] and Gamergate perpetrators have been using these types of threats as a tool to silence women: "anti-female policing in video game culture is an expression of sex and violence that depends on the rhetoric

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[148] DeWinter and Kocurek, 62.
[149] Ibid., 63.

of isolation and rape."[150] Video games that then feature narratives that encourage and endorse

sexualized violence are incredibly damaging.

e) Historical Representation

Problems with fair representation have abounded since the gaming industry's inception.

The first female character was Ms. Pac-man (created in 1981), and she was a female version of a

previously established male character. Her defining features are stereotypically feminine objects

(such as make-up), and she was created only for the purpose of marketing towards women and

girls. Then the damsel character Princess Peach was introduced in *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) as

the narrative impetus for the male protagonist. She had no individual agency and operated for all

intents and purposes as an object to be won. Another damsel character, Princess Zelda, was

introduced in *The Legend of Zelda* (1986) and operated the same way as Princess Peach. The

character Samus Aran from the *Metroid* (1986-2017) series was revealed to be a woman in *Super

Metroid* (1994), however, up until that point the only way to tell Samus was a woman was if a

player beat the game in under five hours, as even the game's instruction booklet referred to her

as 'he.' Her gender was not initially made apparent to all players. There were no obviously

female protagonists until Lara Croft (in 1996), however, Croft is and has been a hyper-sexualized

character. There are virtually no early examples of fair female character representation, as the

earliest characters fit within the tropes explained by Sarkeesian. Even now, as Sarkeesian and

others referenced in this study have pointed out, games tend to portray female characters in

problematic and stereotypical ways.

And though the history of games paints its female characters as tropes, "Dietz (1998)

found that the most common depiction of female characters was no depiction at all: Most games

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[150] Ibid., 58.

simply did not have female characters. Similarly, Braun and Giroux (1989) found that in arcade video games, female screen displays, and synthetic voice emissions were practically non-existent."[151] Female characters are among the minority across all video games, and when they are represented:

> 21% [of games] depicted violence against women. 28% depicted women as sex objects. Only 15% of the games studied portrayed women as heroic characters, and even those heroic roles were mostly sexualized or trivialized. In games with female characters, the females were most likely to be depicted as victims or as damsels in distress. Other common depictions included females portrayed as visions of beauty, as evil or obstacles to the game, and in devalued or insignificant roles.[152]

The above statistics come from a 1998 study of top-selling Sega and Nintendo games, however, several more recent studies have found similar rates of occurrence in both games and games magazine advertisements, such as Dietz's 2005 study, Lynch et al.'s 2016, Dill's and Thill's 2007 study, and others referenced in this study's previous chapters. These results are verified in Sarkeesian's series where she documents that roughly "4% of modern (since 2013) games involve a female in a leading role."[153] The lack of representation, and the lack of non-stereotypical representation contributes to the perpetuation of male-centric ideals and the exclusion of women gamers. Indeed, "given the abundance of hypermasculine men and hypersexualized women in video games, it is no difficult to understand why the majority of visible gamers are (young) men. The cast of many games enables male adolescents [and adults]

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[151] Dill et al, 2005, 116.
[152] Ibid, 116; Dietz, Tracy L, "An examination of violence and gender role portrayals in video games: Implications for gender socialization and aggressive behavior. *SR* 38 (1998): 425-42.
[153] Sarkeesian, *Tropes vs. Women in Games*.

to enact extreme forms of masculinity that are unattainable in their daily lives."[154] Video games, then, have allowed players to enact and participate in hypermasculine power fantasies.

Sarkeesian does point out that there have been some titles where the stereotypical gender roles have been flipped, such as games that change the male character into the 'damsel' to be rescued by a female character. However, they are not equivalent because "damsel characters perpetuate stereotypical myths of female characters, but male damsels do not." Sarkeesian makes the point that "simply reversing the gender roles of a problematic convention is not a long-term solution."[155] She calls for games to look beyond gender and its conventions, and instead think beyond the cliché.

It then becomes imperative to look at games that feature strong representation of female characters; that do go beyond the cliché. Games that break hypermasculine male norms are also important; however, "games that feature male characters as breaking hypermasculine standards still illustrate a diversity of expression not afforded to minority and marginalized players"[156] for "if marginalized players are primarily presented as villains, sidekicks, or absent, the white male hero is the only character who gets to be embodied as a person. Everyone else's identities are scripted by the program and delivered by the computer's mediated interface, while the [white male] avatar is the player's character, and the agent of change and action."[157] Games have a marked need for minority representation, and the games looked at in the next section provide promising examples of what that representation could (and should) look like.

Sarkeesian's tropes provide a background by which to consider more modern games. The games in this study are examined for evidence of narrative and visual tropes, if those tropes are

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[154]Jansz and Martis, 147.
[155] Sarkeesian, "Damsel in Distress: Part 3"
[156] Salter and Blodgett, 77.
[157] Ibid., 75.

subverted and how, and what their portrayals mean in a socio-cultural, feminist, and interpretive

context. Based on avatar theory and social identity theory, the implications of female

representation in video games has significant bearing on real-world social environments. Not

only do objectified representations potentially discourage women and girls playing games or

performing a gamer identity, but men and boys are given a message that hypermasculinity is

powerful and successful. By featuring gameplay that involves graphic violence against women

(and rewarding that violence), games contribute to normalizing and incentivizing those acts,

which feeds into the socio-cultural climate and perpetuates aspects of toxic masculinity.

However, it is entirely possible for games to feature non-objectified and capable female

characters (with male characters that are not hypermasculine) and to "challenge notions of

stereotypes in games, and question status quos and patterns" to affect change."[158]

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[158] Sarkeesian, *Tropes vs. Women in Games*

IV.   Case Studies

The history of games has a long contentious and problematic tendency of assigning women to tropes and stereotypical roles. This is not a unique feature to games as it occurs across media and literature as well: "the gender ideology most often detected in generic fiction is extremely conservative, stereotyping women into the role of virgin or whore, and as the object of quest or adventure, not the subject."[159] As pointed out by Sarkeesian, Jansz, Lynch, and others, women in games are either entirely absent, or forced into lesser and objectified roles. Games in this sense are a type of cultural rhetoric: "rhetoric is a method of discussion or expression that contains underlying values or beliefs and attempts to convince that they are correct. The design of a game, in other words, is a representation of ideas and values of a particular time and place."[160] In other words, games have historically reflected values of a society valuing heteronormativity. With cultural rhetoric in mind, it is interesting then that Lynch et al. discovered a decrease in female character sexualization. It could potentially point to a possible shift in the socio-cultural consciousness, which would provide support to the thinking that anxieties over a perceived "female threat" led to Gamergate.

As such, the games selected for study are those that appear to reflect shifts within gaming culture's atmosphere, based on the characters they present and their market/critical success. First, I discuss the characters Lara Croft and Bayonetta due to their status to many players and critics as "strong female characters." However, the analysis will out the problems with their characters, in that they do not completely reject problematic ideologies as well as they might appear to. Second, I discuss a plot for the player's character (if a female elf is chosen) in the game *Dragon*

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[159] Curti, Lidia, "'D' for Difference: Gender, Genre, Writing" *Female Stories, Female Bodies* (New York University Press. Washington Square, NY, 1998), 30-53.
[160] Salen and Zimmerman, 517.

Age: Origins (2009) and it is then compared to the story-line of the character Vivienne (a woman of color companion character) in the game *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014). In this analysis I discuss that the series illustrates its own evolutionary arc for its representations of female characters, with earlier games both utilizing some tropes and rejecting others, and the last titles rejecting and subverting them. Third, I examine the game *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017) as an example of a non-RPG game with a female default protagonist that the player must play as. The series does many interesting things in subverting many tropes, notably with the fact that the titular character Senua deals with mental psychosis that affects gameplay. Lastly, I examine the game *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017) as an RPG with a female default protagonist and with several other minority groups represented. Indeed, the game has a diverse cast and like Senua's, the player-character Aloy is the focus of the plot-line. However, while *Horizon: Zero* Dawn (2017) makes great strides in terms of fair and diverse representation, the game has been criticized for its appropriation of indigenous cultures, and its problematic usage of terms like 'savage' and 'brave.' Each game's critical rating from the well-established site Metacritic.com is given, as this site allows both critics and players to rate games and comment; thus, giving a detailed picture of how the game was received. The critics' score range is 1-100, and the user score ranges from 1-10. They also give particularly well-received games a 'must play' distinctive category.

The common feature of each of these titles is that they depict female NPCs that have agency, something in itself that breaks many of gaming's traditions. Historically, NPCs do not challenge the player's agency and control over the narrative, however, particularly in the *Dragon Age* series this is not the case. Furthermore, these games also have the trope-breaking feature of simply being able to play as a female protagonist, something in itself that is subversive.

However, not all of the narratives and physical portrayals fully break tropes, at least not until the more recent titles studied.

   a) **Bayonetta and Lara Croft**

Bayonetta of the series of the same name and Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider* (1996-2018) series are the lead characters in their games, and as such, the plot-lines follow their journeys. However, as Sarkeesian's taxonomy points out, their characters remain sexualized and thus serve the gaze of a male player, but this type of portrayal is not uncommon in games: "Croft and most of the subsequent 'strong and sexy' female protagonists projected have been repetitive as characters, while others have been completely disregarded."[161] Figure 4.1 shows a side-by-side comparison of the two characters, taken from the more recent titles (Bayonetta on the left and Lara on the right). Lara's character has shown an effort to be less sexualized as the games advance, however her clothing remains skin tight to the point that the outlines of her abdomen can be seen and offers little protective value (especially as Lara constantly embarks on dangerous adventures in the wilderness.

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[161] Han, Hye-Won, "Characterization of Female Protagonists in Video Games: A Focus on Lara Croft" *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 20, no. 43(2014): 27-48, 156.

Figure 4.1. "Bayonetta and Lara Croft" Wikipedia. 2019. Digital images. Sourced from: http://en.wikipedia.org

Bayonetta is a particularly pointed example of sexualization considering that one of her in-game powers come from her removing her clothes, and that the opening for the second game in the series, the camera pans over her body without ever showing her face. Indeed, "while Bayonetta has agency in the story, she is still treated as a prop by the game camera, which often leers at her, zooming in on her ass as it glides under that tight dominatrix suit. Bayonetta can best any evil angel, but she is powerless against that camera, which can objectify her for cheap thrills, even when it distracts from the story and the character."[162] Bayonetta is funny, quick-witted, and a strong character capable of defending herself; however the impact of her personality is lessened based on her visual representation. The author of the same quote goes on to note that male characters in games are never objectified by the camera: "every time the camera leers at a woman, it makes a very simple statement: this game is for guys. We are guys and we have made a game for other guys and look guys, isn't this girl hot?"[163] Supporters of the game see Bayonetta

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[162] Herold, Charles, "Is Bayonetta 2 Sexist, and Should You Care?" (Lifewire.com, 2018)
[163] Ibid.

as unapologetic in her sexuality, which is true. However, that sexuality is the focus of every camera shot, and many narrative points. It does not present her as a woman that exists outside of the male gaze.

In the case of Lara Croft, much of the same is true. Several studies have been conducted on the implications of her character, with many noting that she was the first default female protagonist in any console game, something which at the time was revolutionary.[164] But it remains that she is a sexualized character. This discrepancy is explained by Salen and Zimmerman: "In one sense, a *Tomb Raider* player is the spectator of a grossly sexist image, even as the player interactively takes on an empowering female role."[165] Like Bayonetta, any agency Lara has is subject to her body being objectified. For instance, "Lara Croft is presented in a manner that explicitly emphasizes her sexual physicality, while her symbolic costume also exposes her body to a great extent. The camera keeps a certain distance from Lara Croft from the rear and focuses on explicitly exposed body parts when she steps into a narrow space or climbs up to higher locations."[166] Like Bayonetta, any agency Lara has in the narrative is subverted by her physical representation. Further complicating the *Tomb Raider* games is the fact that the over-arching narrative has Lara embarking on white British colonialist adventures. She travels to jungles and ancient tombs for treasure, and in many instances, fights the indigenous cultures already present, as Luke Winke puts it: "at the end of the day, Lara Croft is a white woman who tracks down riches and artifacts in other people's homeland."[167]

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[164] Romano, Aja, "Why we've been arguing about Lara Croft for two decades" (Vox.com, 2018).
[165] Salen and Zimmerman, 526.
[166] Han, 30.
[167] Winke, Luke, "'Shadow of the Tomb Raider' to Tackle Incongruity of White, Rich Croft Adventures" (Variety.com, 2018).

These types of portrayals also carry a problematic implication that male characters are allowed to 'inhabit' the body of the object of their desire. Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. point out an analysis by Mary Flanagan: "more than the indulgence of looking at these stars within filmic worlds, we now embrace the very real pleasures of controlling these desired bodies."[168] Players control Lara and Bayonetta's actions, dictating what they do in their narrative. The fact that they are objectified makes this problematic, as players are allowed to control an objectified woman, thus removing any agency she may have had.

These games offer complicated examples of female representation. On the one hand, they present female characters in powerful and mostly dominant narrative positions. They are the default protagonists and the narratives are about their journeys. However, Lara cannot be divorced from her colonialist narrative, and nuanced and fair representation in games calls for both a rejection of narrative and visual female character tropes. In this case, neither character breaks away from the objectifying male gaze, and thus do not completely subvert the problematic history of the gaming industry.

b) *Dragon Age* **(2009-2014) Series**

BioWare, the studio that created *Dragon Age*, specializes in choice-based RPGs. A common feature across many of their released games is that players are allowed a fully customizable avatar, which means that they can customize their player character to look how they wish, something that in itself breaks the expectation that there can only be a white male protagonist. An example character customization screen was shown in figure 2.3. Players can select skin tone and how the face and neck are shaped, however, they do not have the ability to pick a body type other than what is pre-programmed. The body types for both male and female

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[168] Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 177.

characters depict an ideal body-shape for both genders, with female characters having thin waists, but larger hips and chests; and male characters with slim hips and muscular chests and legs. However, in their titles *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* specifically, BioWare includes a diverse character casting with both people of color and LGBTQIA+ representation. For instance, in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), one NPC is a transgender man and, if the player chooses, player-characters can interact with him and hear his story. But while *Mass Effect* also explores these issues, it is in the *Dragon Age* titles where we see the greatest example of diverse representation, and narratives covering socio-political issues.

These games also allow players a great deal of agency in control over both dialogue and plot choices, as well as the freedom to enter into both heterosexual and homosexual virtual 'relationships' with a companion character, after their player-character becomes close to that companion via dialogue options. Companions can, however, turn the player-character down. There is an approval/disapproval system that is based upon the player-characters actions in the plot and the dialogue choices when conversing with companions. If the disapproval score for a companion gets low enough, they will confront the player-character and can leave the player-character's party, which gives these side characters a high-level of agency independent from the player-character. This feature is unique, as secondary characters usually do not infringe upon the player's agency in controlling the game narrative. In addition to these features, BioWare's games (*Dragon Age* in particular), allow players to engage with and explore complex socio-political issues like racism, xenophobia, artificial intelligence vs organic life, homophobia and transphobia, addiction and recovery, and religious/institutional repression and rebellion. For instance, in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), players can choose their 'race' (dwarf, elf, human, or qunari) and subsequently are exposed to certain realities of racism and xenophobia, as some

NPCs and companions will treat the player differently based on race. And importantly, these games are popular with the gaming audience even as they explore these issues.

Metacritic.com has given all games of the *Dragon Age* series consistently positive reviews. *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) has a critic score of 91, a user score of 8.9, and a 'must play' distinction.[169] *Dragon Age II* (2011) has a critic score of 82 but a user score of 4.5 (with negative user reviews citing repetitive plot quests and lack of complexity in combat mechanics, but note that the characters themselves are strong).[170] *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) has a critic score of 85 and a user score of 7.0.[171] Even when user reviews were not favorable, their concerns did not typically lie with the politics of the game, or the diverse cast of characters. Each of their games includes different female characters in leading positions, while exploring socio-political issues; without significantly affecting critical/user reception.

i)   *Dragon Age*: **Visual Representation**

In the *Dragon Age* series, a clear evolution of visual female character representation is visible, particularly in regard to the 'lingerie as body armor' trope defined by Anita Sarkeesian and Jeroen Jansz. In *Origins* (2009) there was a particular armor set (pictured in figure 3.4 from the previous chapter) where male characters were completely covered, whereas on female characters the armor set looks similar to a sports bra and skirt, with her chest and stomach bare. There is a companion named Morrigan (in *Origins*) whose default 'armor' is a bra and skirt with little else (shown in figure 4.2, on the left), and in *Dragon Age II* (2011), there is a companion

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[169] "Dragon Age: Origins; PC" Metacritic. https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/dragon-age-origins

[170] "Dragon Age II; PC" Metacritic https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/dragon-age-ii

[171] "Dragon Age: Inquisition; PC" https://www.metacritic.com/game/xbox-one/dragon-age-inquisition

named Isabela (a pirate) whose clothing accentuates her sexual features and offers little in the

way of protection (seen also in figure 4.2, on the right).

Figure 4.2. Morrigan and Isabela from *Dragon Age*. Fanpop.com. 2013. Digital images.
Sourced from the Dragon Age Wiki.

For these two female characters, the clothing is their standard appearance. However, the games

do not objectify these women based on appearances. Unlike in *Bayonetta* and *Tomb Raider*, the

camera does not focus on their sexual features at every opportunity, and thus does not completely

paint their bodies for the consumption of the male gaze. The focus instead, is on who they are as

characters: confident women with complete agency, their own personal narrative backgrounds,

and the ability to disagree with the player-character and leave depending on the player-

character's interaction with them and the approval/disapproval points. The approval/disapproval

system actually incentivizes the player-character to get along with their companions, as it is

entirely possible for nearly every character to leave the player's party, thus making plot quests

and fight sequences potentially more difficult, which is an acknowledgement of the idea of 'meaningful play' raised by Salen and Zimmerman: "all play means something. Playing a game means that choices mean something; choices have consequences."[172] And by *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), the trend of sexualized body armor is nearly entirely absent, aside from two DLC (downloadable content; must be purchased) armor sets (titled Antaam-sar and Shrokra-tar), but these armor sets offer the same amount of coverage to both male and female characters. Indeed, player armor is the same design for both male and female player-characters, and the only female companion with armor that exposes the middle of her chest is Vivienne. However, the remainder of her armor is a blend of defensive and decorative, which is fitting with her character (she is a noble and makes references throughout the game to the importance of fashion when one seeks power. Further, she has an alternate armor style the player can choose that covers her chest. Figure 4.3 shows side-by-side female and male player character armor sets, and 4.4 shows Vivienne's armor styles.

Figure 4.3. Female vs. Male Armor in *Inquisition* (2014). Digital image.
https://www.nexusmods.com/dragonageinquisition/mods/795/?tab=images

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[172] Salen and Zimmerman, 31, 364.

Figure 4.4. Vivienne's Armor Styles (2017) Digital images. Sourced from:
https://dragonage.fandom.com/wiki/Masterwork_Battlemage_Armor

Another factor unique to *Dragon Age* and its visual representation of characters is that only one

of the games features a male character as central to the box art. The box art for *Dragon Age:*

Inquisition (2014) shows an ambiguously gendered player-character (the inquisitor) on the cover.

Figure 4.5 shows the box art for all three games, in chronological order from left to right.

Figure 4.5. *Dragon Age* (2009-2014) series box art. Wikipedia. Digital images. Sourced
from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dragon_Age/

As stated in chapter two, it is almost unheard of for female characters to be depicted on box art at all, let alone in non-sexualized ways.[173] The fact that the series features an ambiguously gendered protagonist on the cover of their third title may point to an awareness of historical gaming trends and an effort to be more inclusive to players of all genders. Indeed, the pop-culture website Kotaku.com pointed out a series of tweets by the developing team that indicated the neutral figure was intentional. The lead writer's (Mike Laidlaw) tweet stated: "an uncertain gender was absolutely intended. It's whoever you want to roll, essentially."[174] Having a neutral figure was a consciously inclusive act on the part of the development team.

    ii)   *Dragon Age*: **Narrative Representation**

Across all *Dragon Age* games, there are a total of eleven female companion characters and twelve male characters, each of whom are given their own back-stories that players can interact with via dialogue and quest interactions. Each of the player's companions has their own personal game missions and quests that reveal their backstories to the player. The important fact here is that the series gives equal time towards all companions, regardless of gender, and gives each a developed story arc. And in most instances, the female characters inhabit dominant or equal narrative positions, without becoming damsels or otherwise adhering to tropes. There are even more female characters that, while not part of the player-character's companions, still feature as allies or secondary characters with heavy impact on plot. The time players can spend with each companion character (and secondary characters) is roughly equal. Also, all games allow the player to choose the gender of their player-character, thus potentially avoiding alienation of female and female-identified players. One user review of their experience playing

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[173] Burgess et al., 419-33.
[174] Struan, John, "Here is the Gender-Neutral-Box-Art for *Dragon Age: Inquisition*" (Kotaku.com, 2014).

Dragon Age: Origins (2009) states: "Dragon Age provided me a way to bring a character by my own hand to life, and on top of that, sculpt and build a world based off my own decisions. I will always understand on a truly deeper level that custom characters make for a more dynamic experience."[175] The important point in the player's ability to choose their player-character's gender is that the narrative is written in a way that both male and female players can enjoy and immerse themselves in. This type of mechanic means that (aside from certain companion characters being un-romanceable due to their sexual orientation, and thus no access to certain romance plots) the player-character's gender has no effect on narrative development, as developers have to make the game open enough to allow both male and female protagonists. This feature rejects the trend of male narratives being written differently than female narratives (at least for the player-character plot lines), as Ruth Page points out has been the trend when she states: "the way content is structured as a plot can carry gendered meanings. Gender may influence the use that elements of plot are put to."[176] However, there is one player-character main plot with a gendered difference in *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009), and I discuss this plot further in the analysis.

In order to analyze *Dragon Age* (2009-2014) for its adherence to, or disavowal of, stereotypical female tropes, attention must be paid to the narratives and representations of secondary female characters as their plot-lines are written with a critical feminist perspective that focuses on women's experience: "stories are examined with the intention to recognize expressions of resistance and emancipation and to highlight and expose the invisible, silenced, or taken-for-granted historical, structural, and ideological forces and conditions that lead to or

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[175] Munsch, Cordelia, "How Character Creation Lets Us Project Ourselves into Games" (Gamesavvy.net, 2019).
[176] Page, 65.

perpetuate social injustices."[177] There are several characters to choose from across the three games, but it is not within the scope of this study to examine each one in the detail required. Therefore, what follows is the analysis of the aforementioned example of a gendered difference in player-character plot and a close analysis of an un-romanceable woman of color companion character in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014).

In *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009), players play one of six 'origin' narratives for their player, split by cultural and racial difference. For instance, if the player chooses to play as a dwarf, they can either play as a dwarf noble or a 'casteless' dwarf. The gendered plotline comes from the female city elf origin. In the *Dragon Age* universe, there are two separate groups of elves: the Dalish, and those that live in cities and/or are enslaved by humans. The Dalish are a nomadic tribal group, that mostly live in the wilderness and avoid contact with any of the other races. And the city elves that are not enslaved are forced to live in slums called 'alienages.' Elves throughout the series serve as an avatar for groups of racially oppressed peoples in the real world. Considering this fact, it is problematic on multiple levels that the female city-elf origin plot sequence involves the female protagonist threatened with rape/sexual assault by three human noblemen who kidnap her and several other female elves from their alienage. One of the women, Shianni, is raped. Further, in the male city-elf origin, the women are still kidnapped, but the player-character is sent on a 'rescue-the-damsel' quest to save the women, thus doubly taking away the agency of the female characters in that situation.

While the inclusion of any scene that at least somewhat realistically depicts sexual assault towards a woman is something revolutionary and not often (if ever) see, *Dragon Age: Origins* (2011) misses a significant and meaningful opportunity by not choosing to represent the realities

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[177] Pitre, Nicole Y, "Critical Feminist Narrative Inquiry: Advancing Knowledge Through Double-Hermeneutic Narrative Analysis" *Advances in Nursing Science* 36, no. 2(2013):118-32.

of the healing of survivors. In the quest, after being kidnapped, the player-character's fiancé

attempts to save the women but is subsequently murdered in front of the protagonist. The female

player-character then attacks the men, takes one of their swords, and kills them herself to then

fight her way out of the castle. The game does not actually depict the threatened sexual assault or

the rape of Shianni, and it also completely vilifies the three noblemen that kidnap the women.

The game makes it clear that the men are not to be liked: they are incredibly racist and view

elven women as lesser-than. For instance, when they first appear in the alienage, one states

flippantly: "It's a party, isn't it? Grab a whore and have a good time. (*Laughs*)." The scenes these

men inhabit do not focus on them in a way that glorifies their assault of the women, as has been

the trope in games referenced by Sarkeesian. Instead, the game chooses to focus on the effects

the experience has on the women, particularly Shianni, and shows their emotional distress

through the sequences. In fact, Shianni eventually becomes the leader of the alienage, and helps

the player-character in the final boss fight as a leader.

However, the game does force female players that choose this background to play out a

sequence that mirrors real-world sexual assault—and, more importantly, real-world sexual

assault against women based on racism—without warning and without being able to opt-out.

This is problematic in the fact that it potentially forces a survivor of real-world sexual assault to

relive their experience(s). In other words, though including a depiction of the experience of a

woman facing a sex assault threat, the execution of the plot is tone deaf to the experience of

surviving sex assault. Several critics have taken issue with the fact that the game does so,

pointing out that it would have been possible to present such a story-line without voyeuristically

requiring players to inhabit the experience.[178] Indeed, while the female player-character kills her would-be assaulter (and thus kill a symbol of hyper-masculine power), the game does not devote any more attention to in the rest of the game. No companions mention it and there is no dialogue that the player-character can choose that discusses it; it is completely abandoned. The game thus does not use a trauma narrative in a way that focuses on the healing of the survivor(s); even Shianni's processing isn't depicted, when she's seen again, she makes one comment on it and nothing more. Several critics have taken issue with the fact that, considering how the Elven race is coded in the game, the sequence depicts racial sexual violence without making it anything other than a brief background sequence. And more importantly, that the sequence makes it so that sexual assault is the motivator for the female player-character's story arc. For after she kills the nobleman that attempted to rape her, she is arrested and forced to accept a deal by the Gray Warden (an organization that fights the zombie-like creatures known as darkspawn) that recruits her into the organization. She has no choice but to accept.

But while the city-elf origin story missed significant opportunities and presents several problematic implications, it does feature several companion characters that have detailed and moving plot-lines. And by the third game in the series, both visual and narrative representation do not adhere to any of Sarkeesian's tropes, or the historical context of games for female representation. Each female character in the game has complete agency, even when entering into romances with the player-character. For instance, if the player makes certain choices for the plot, or chooses certain dialogue options, the romance can be ended by the companion character (the same is true for any of the romanceable characters, regardless of gender). And in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2015), players are introduced to an un-romanceable woman of color companion

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[178] Such as: Lacina, Dia, "'You've got a lot of nerve Knife-Ears:' Indigenous Trauma and the Female City Elf in Dragon Age: Origins" (*Medium.com*, 2017).

named Vivienne (she is one of three un-romanceable companions, the others being two men).

While recruiting Vivienne is optional, the same is true for six of the nine other companions (the

three that aren't are with the player from the beginning of the game but can still disagree with

player choices). Vivienne's character arc is incredibly detailed. When the player meets her, she

holds the title of official court enchanter to the empress of the in-game country of Orlais: a

position with a high-level of power, which sets her up to be a powerful and dominant female

character. The game makes it clear she obtained her position through her own effort: she was

born a mage (mages are feared and second-class citizens that mostly have no rights) and taken to

the Circle (towers in which mages are kept and/or imprisoned in varying, sometimes terrible

conditions), only to rise through the Circle's ranks, become her tower's representative to the

imperial court, and becomes the mistress of Duke Bastien de Ghislain (by her choice). Doing so

made her a target of other nobles, however, Vivienne either defeated the assassins they sent to

kill her (returning them frozen solid to their employers) or convinced them to work for her

instead. Ultimately, she became the court enchanter to Empress Celene and changed the position

into an advisory position by winning the empress's trust. Her reputation led to her being nick-

named Madam de Fer (Iron Lady, a reference to Margaret Thatcher), which indicates the level of

fear and respect other members of the court have for her. She is a masterful player of what

Orlesians refer to as the 'Grand Game,' politicking that requires espionage, manipulation, clever

speech, and currying personal connections and favors. In an interview of several media studies

scholars titled "Digital games and gender" one scholar pointed out the female power in games:

"[their 'strength'] is typically explained away in contemporary representations through the

possession of some kind of 'supernatural' or 'magical' ability, which produces the association of

femininity and power as an exception."[179] But as Vivienne's status as a mage affords her *less*

power in the game-world, her personal ability is further highlighted and subversive. In the world

of *Dragon Age,* mages are entirely vilified, not only by the human Chantry (an analog for the

Catholic church/institutionalized religion), but also by the other in-game races as well. For

instance, the Qunari openly subjugate their mages as living weapons used by their military (these

mages have absolutely no freedom). So while *Dragon Age* does not deal explicitly engage with

racism based on skin color, the series explores the more extreme connotations of othering via its

mage characters. Mages are openly treated as second-class citizens; indeed, even noble born

mages are not all afforded full freedoms. Some mages are even made 'tranquil,' which refers to a

process in which a mage's ability to feel emotion is taken away by force (via the Chantry's

Templar knights). In terms of the game-world, what Vivienne managed to do with her position as

a mage is impressive and highlights her character's individual agency and power. She was able

to politick successfully, and subvert her status as a mage, enough that she became a trusted

advisor to an empress.

The game does not shy away from portraying her as a strong character. Her strength is

made immediately evident in the first scene with her. In it, the player-character is harassed and

threatened by the Marquis Alphonse at Vivienne's ball, and Vivienne stops the Marquis mid-

attack by freezing him solid as he reaches for his sword and the following exchange occurs:

> **Vivienne:** My dear marquis, how unkind of you to use such language in *my*
>
> house, to *my* guests. You know such rudeness is…intolerable.
>
> **Marquis Alphonse:** Madame Vivienne…I humbly beg your pardon.

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[179] Arthurs, Jane and Usha Zacharias, "Commentary and Criticism, Introduction: Digital games and gender" *Feminist Media Studies* 7, no. 1(2007): p. 97-110.

Vivienne: You should. Whatever am I going to do with you, my dear? [turns to

player-character] My lady/lord, you are the wounded party in this unfortunate

affair. What would you have me do with this foolish, foolish man?

Players then have the option to tell Vivienne to kill him, that they don't care what happens to

him, or to let him go. If told to kill him, she will, and the latter to options result in Vivienne

humiliating him further before he runs off. In the following sequence, the player can ask what

Vivienne has to gain by joining the player-character's inquisition, she states: "The same thing

anyone gets by fighting this chaos: the chance to meet my enemy, to decide my fate. I won't wait

quietly for destruction." Throughout the game, her dialogue reveals how much agency her

character has. She constantly challenges the player's decisions and will debate the player on their

viewpoints (especially in regard to the treatment of mages).

There are also tensions between her and one of the male companions, Blackwall, that

sub-textually explore the typical male response to the 'female threat.' Vivienne's character is a

direct violation of patriarchal order—she is her own woman, powerful, and not able to be

romanced by players. In games, depictions of a 'female threat' character have typically only been

done so that male characters can reassert dominance over said character, and so end the threat,

such as with the *Castlevania* example given in chapter three. Blackwall is openly hostile towards

Vivienne: "'Madame' Vivienne only allied with the Inquisition because she knows it will bring

her power. The most poisonous snakes are often the most beautiful." Not only does he call her a

snake, but his reasoning for doing so is also that she wants power. But he goes further in

consistently mocking her when the player travels with both of them in the party, saying things

like: "you must miss the comforts of your mansions, traveling with us as you do" and "would

you like a silk handkerchief to wipe the mud off your greaves, *Lady* Vivienne?" His comments

are incredibly sexist and dismiss the level of skill and prowess Vivienne displays throughout the game, painting Vivienne as a "delicate lady" and attempting to undermine her authority based on gendered values. But most interestingly, Vivienne responds to these comments, and her responses illustrate her power and rejection of Blackwall's attempts to cow her: (to the former comment) "I miss them. I do not require them. But please, continue to imagine me a pampered lady, if it makes you feel superior" and (to the latter) "(*Laughs*) It's just mud. Mud bothers me as much as your clumsy mockery, which is to say, not at all." Her power is 'threatening' and made more so by the fact that Vivienne knows how powerful she is, and how unapologetic she is about it. She does not demure to any of the companion and NPCs, and also does not demure to the player.

It then becomes important that her character is un-romanceable, especially if the player-character is male, as it allows her character to subvert the features of the 'sinister seductress' trope, that is common when games feature attractive and powerful female characters. In fact, if the player attempts to flirt with Vivienne, her response is to laugh and say condescendingly: "Oh, aren't you *charming*." Vivienne's character is not simply the token of 'strong female character' that occurred with Bayonetta and Lara Croft, as she is developed and three-dimensional. For while she operates as a powerful force in the narrative, as the game progresses, players get hints at Vivienne's slightly tumultuous internal world through a character named Cole (Vivienne will not discuss her personal life with anyone). Cole (a demon/spirit depending on player understanding of narrative) can read people's minds and memories and he draws out Vivienne's motivations unprompted:

Cole: You're afraid. You don't have to be.

>**Vivienne:** My dear Inquisitor, please restrain your pet demon. I do not want it addressing me.
>
>**Inquisitor (the player):** Cole, Vivienne doesn't want to talk right now.
>
>**Cole:** She's afraid! *'Everything bright, roar of anger as the demon rears. No, I will not fall. No one will control me ever again. Flash of white as the world comes back. Shaking, hollow, Harrowed, but smiling at templars to show them I'm me.'* I'm not like that. I can protect you. If templars come for you, I will kill them.
>
>**Vivienne**: Delightful.

There is another dialogue sequence with Cole that makes clear she faced discrimination based on her skin color by the Marquis Alphonse (the same one that she humiliates/kills):

>**Cole:** *Stepping into the parlor, hem of my gown snagged, no, adjust before I go in, must look perfect.*
>
>**Vivienne:** My dear, your pet is speaking again. Do silence it.
>
>**Cole**: *Voices inside. Marquis Alphonse: 'I do hope Duke Bastien puts out the lights before he touches her. But then, she must disappear in the dark.'* Gown *tight between my fingers, cold all over. Unacceptable.* Wheels turn, strings pull. He hurt you. You left a letter, let out a lie so he would do something foolish against the Inquisition. A trap.
>
>**Vivienne:** Inquisitor, as your demon lacks manners, perhaps you could get Solas to train it.

This dialogue reveals that Vivienne enacted revenge upon the Marquis for his comment by tricking him into attacking the player-character (the Inquisition's representative). Vivienne's narrative is ultimately about a marginalized woman (as a mage, a woman, and as a woman of

color) reclaiming power for herself. Cole reveals to players that she is afraid of her magic and what it can do, but she refuses to submit to it or anyone. And when the Marquis Alphonse made his racist comment, she responded by manipulating him indirectly to attack the Inquisition and get himself killed, either by the player-character telling Vivienne to kill him or by joining the Orlesian army and dying in battle.

One last plot sequence for Vivienne rounds out her nuance, as interpretations of the scene among players vary widely. In the sequence, she tells the inquisitor that the Duke Bastien is dying and needs help in acquiring an ingredient for an antidote. The player-character witnesses the Duke on his death bed Vivienne gives him the antidote she made. All of the emotion in this scene is shown via close-ups of Vivienne's face, and not in her dialogue (which fits with her personality). No matter which heart the player-character obtains, Duke Bastien dies. When he does, Vivienne reacts by saying: "My darling? Bastien?" before realizing he died, and then closes her eyes in grief for a few moments. She then quickly internalizes her emotions and re-adopts the mask of indifference she uses for the rest of the game. This is where the ambiguity comes in, due to the fact that Vivienne is a renowned player of the Orlesian political 'Game.' One interpretation is that Vivienne is sincere, simply grieving before putting her usual 'mask' back in place. The other is that Vivienne was manipulating the inquisitor to helping her poison the duke, in order to gain power and/or that Vivienne was using the fact that the inquisitor showed interest in her affairs to gain political points in court. The discrepancy between these two viewpoints is summed up in the following quote taken from a *Dragon Age* discussion board post:

> What I find most interesting is that even after playing all possible options, after seeing all possible reactions from Vivienne, after talking to Bastien's family, after hearing her own lover's dying words, we STILL can't get a handle on what she

really thinks. And not in the sense that her armor remains intact: instead, we can't
even tell when she's wearing armor. And that's probably exactly what Vivienne
wants.[180]

Vivienne is a powerful female character with extreme agency, even over how the player-character sees her and interacts with her. She serves as an example of female characters who break narrative tropes for female video game characters. She never adopts a submissive narrative position to a dominant male character, and while she is a secondary character, she is given a complete interactive personal narrative which explores the various nuances of her personality. She is pragmatic, intelligent, self-sufficient, and willing to give advice to the player-character. She is not dependent on other characters, and even resists help in most instances. Vivienne further directly subverts the sinister seductress trope by being non-sexualized and unromanceable, and also by the fact that her narrative never involves her death or her being dominated by a male character.

And while the series had issues with visual representation in its armor sets, the 2015 release of *Inquisition* saw that feature removed from the games. The problematic questline pointed out in *Origins* was not repeated, and thus should be viewed as an exception to the norm. Instead, the series began to focus heavily on female characters having fair representation is both narrative and visual aspects.

c) *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* **(2017)**

RPGs like *Dragon Age* allow players to pick their character's gender, which does break tropes in that it allows for the choice of a female main character. However, there are few AAA

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[180] User: hyzenthlay1701, "[DAI Spoilers] Vivienne's snow wyvern quest Ambiguity" *JH_360*. (Reddit.com, 2016)
https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/3ifm6s/dai_spoilers_viviennes_snow_wyvern_quest_ambiguity/

games that give a female protagonist character as default, but *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017) does so. The game is an action adventure RPG developed by a small independent team of twenty developers working with the studio Ninja Theory as their publisher. In it, players play as the character Senua, a Pict warrior who journeys alone to the Norse underworld (Helheim/Hel) in order to retrieve the soul of her murdered lover Dillion. The main game narrative involves Senua struggling with visual, auditory, and sensory hallucinations while fighting creatures from Norse mythology in order to reach the goddess Hela, who has Dillion's soul. Throughout the game, in order to advance, Senua must confront the aspects of her psychosis, and ultimately comes to accept her past and the fact that she now stands alone.

Aside from giving players a default female protagonist, another reason I chose this game for study is for its representation of psychosis. Senua is afflicted by both hallucinations of an entity she calls "the darkness" and voices she refers to as "furies." Furthermore, the game frequently flashes back to her memories of abuse, isolation, and finding Dillion's body suspended in a Viking blood eagle after their village was raided. The plot of the game functions in parallel as a metaphor for Senua's overcoming of her personal demons and accepting her psychosis as part of her. The game requires players to wear headphones, and they will continually hear Senua's furies whispering to them in stereo as they play the game, meshing gameplay sensorially with Senua's 'lived' experience. The game is also unique in that the development team brought in mental health consultants, in order to accurately portray psychosis and to consult with people living with mental illness in order to avoid misrepresenting that group. Among those involved with the project were two psychology professors from the University of Cambridge and the University of Durham, the biomedical nonprofit Wellcome

Trust, and patients of a 'recovery college' (a facility that functions both as a health center and college campus for patients).[181]

Reviews for the game are positive, the Metacritic critical score is 88, with the user score at 7.3, and with users commenting: "*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* is a harrowing journey into the fragility of the mind. It's a masterpiece in storytelling." And one anonymous user went even further: "*Hellblade* is one of those games that demands to be played. With outstanding visuals, sound, and performances, is excels at telling a dark and emotional tale of mental illness. It's more than a game, it's truly an experience." Positive reviews such as this for games with sensitive subject matter are significant, as they could cautiously point to a cultural desire for emotionally representative story-lines. The fact that the game also revolves entirely around a singular, non-sexualized female character's experiences is also important in the context of the gaming community atmosphere following Gamergate.

i) *Hellblade* (2017): Visual Representation

As Anita Sarkeesian states in her series, "sexualized outfits contribute to the hyper-sexualization of female characters. This occurs when [sexual] attributes are made the center of attention and highlighted above all else."[182] It has the effect of reducing the existence of female characters to only be for the satisfaction of the male gaze. *Senua's Sacrifice* (2017), however, breaks this trend in a variety of ways. On the surface level, Senua wears historically accurate armor and war paint (woad). The armor shows signs of wear and tear (mud, dirt, and blood) as Senua advances, thus giving an appropriately realistic depiction that matches the game's

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[181] Lloyd, James, "How Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice deals with psychosis" (Science Focus, 2018).
[182] Sarkeesian, "Lingerie is not Armor"

narrative. The proportions of Senua's body are realistic, instead of with emphasis placed on sexual features. Figure 4.6 shows Senua's full body in the opening game sequence.

Figure 4.6. Senua. Digital image. Sourced from the game.

Another unique mechanic in the game is that, if players 'die' and reach a fail-state, a black mark will spread up Senua's arm, causing her to lose sensation and if it makes it to her head, players will lose all progress. This means that the physical tolls Senua's body goes through do not disappear and are instead reflected in gameplay mechanics. Indeed, in cutscenes, Senua is seen with blood from her fights on her clothes and in her hair. The box art also features a close-up of Senua's face, and she is the only figure on the cover.

But the more interesting break of convention is the use of the game's camera. Key plot sequences put focus on Senua's face, and the emotions that it portrays, not on her body and bodily injuries. In many instances, these features have Senua gazing directly outward at the player, an effect that causes the player to reflect on what is happening psychologically instead of

physically. The game then becomes about what effects the plot has on Senua as a person, especially as the player has no control during these sequences. In one telling sequence, the camera goes further in that it separates the player from Senua. In this sequence, Senua is hallucinating talking to Dillion at some point in her past. Dillion is off-camera and when Senua is addressing him, she is looking directly out at the player. And when Dillion asks Senua if she has to journey alone, and offers to go with her, Senua looks at the player and says: "This is my battle. I have to face it alone" (figure 4.7).

This is my battle. I have to face it alone. Away from here.
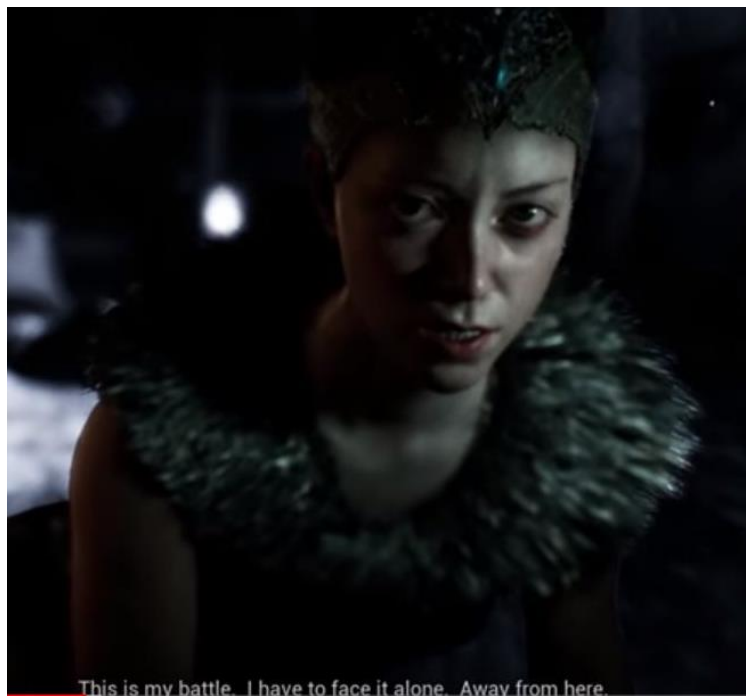
Figure 4.7. Senua addresses the player. (2018). Digital image. Sourced from the game.

Scenes such as these, where Senua addresses both the player and the things haunting her in the game, have the unique effect of implicating the player in contributing to Senua's doubts. The voices and her memories serve largely as painful reminders, and her gaze makes the player take on an active viewing role in those sequences. They serve as Senua's character reminding players that this is *her* journey, the player is, as the first of Senua's furies says in the opening sequence,

"coming along." Senua becomes dominant in the narrative to the point that she actively separates herself from the player by reminding players the game is about her experiences.

ii)   *Hellblade* (2017): Narrative Representation

There are several features of Senua's narrative that break established gender norm conventions of video games. First, the game presents what appears at first glance as a gender reversal of the damsel in distress trope: Senua's quest is to rescue the soul of her male lover Dillion. The role-reversal trope itself is common, and Sarkeesian acknowledges that doing so is subversive but not a sustainable solution.[183] Sarkeesian then calls for making games that feature true female heroes, without a narrative that heavily depends on a male character for plot advancement. In *Senua*, the inciting incident for the narrative is Dillion's death and her desire to release his trapped soul, which does fit within the trope of making male characters into the 'damsel.' However, Dillion is very rarely heard from in the game (only in Senua's hallucinations) and the story focuses instead on Senua's past and current trauma, and her overcoming it.

The ending scene of the game is where the damsel trope is broken. In it, Senua is overwhelmed by her emotions and her inner demons, which results in the goddess Hela killing her, as Senua is unable to fight back. Hela then takes Dillion's head (that Senua had carried with her because it's 'the seat of his soul') and throws it into an abyss. But, when the camera pans back to Senua, Senua's body has been replaced by Hela's. The metaphor of this scene is that Senua had been carrying Dillion with her with enough guilt that she became her own worst enemy (Hela is the final game boss). Through her flashbacks and halluncinations, players discover that she blames her psychosis for Dillion's death—that she sees it as a curse. But when

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[183] Sarkeesian, "Damsel in Distress: Part 3"

Dillion's head is thrown from the cliff (by Senua/Hela), it is a symbolic rejection of her guilt, and a rejection of the hold that Dillion had over her—a hold that was keeping her from moving on and growing as a person. Various emotions play across Senua's face before it is acknowledged that she has accepted herself, and the images of Helheim fade away. Senua then once again directly faces the players, saying that she has another story to tell, and invites them to 'follow' her and her furies. Thus, showing that Senua has ultimately overcome her trauma and learned how to accept it as a part of herself.

The second trope-breaking aspect of the game involves what Senua refers to as her "darkness." At various points in the game, the "darkness" confronts her and speaks to her, first doing so when she calls out in a dark room. It repeatedly degrades her and attempts to emotionally manipulate her. In one scene the darkness threatens her with, "Did you think I would let you go? Did you think that you had lost me in the wilds? I will never let you go. You can't get rid of me. I am your shadow." The voice that speaks to her is male, and players later discover, that the "darkness" is a hallucination of her abusive father, Zynbel. The game then implies that Senua's mother (Galena) lived with a similar psychosis to Senua's, and that Zynbel abused Galena as well because of it. The abuse of her mother ultimately resulted in Senua's father burning her mother alive, which invokes the long history of witch-burnings. Zynbel told the village that Senua's mother was infected by a curse that would ruin them all, and the only solution was to offer her to the gods. He then tells Senua that in this act, her mother was 'saved.' Senua's father/darkness functions in the game as a metaphor for patriarchal and patrilineal oppression. Indeed, it is revealed that Senua's father actively prevented her from leaving the house, at one point even locking her in a pit. He actively takes away both her physical and mental agency, even going so far as to convince her that her voices are a curse that will destroy

everyone she meets. He is the embodiment of a threat of male violence and abuse. The game's quest-lines and plot function as a metaphor for Senua rejecting the notions her father forced on her, such as the notion that her psychosis is a curse to be feared and rejected.

This theme is reflected in how players can interact with Senua's furies. In order to advance in the game, listening to Senua's voices becomes helpful for the player. In combat, the voices will shout out instructions for her and the player, that then help Senua avoid getting injured. Also, in each of the cutscenes that follow each time the player solves the puzzles necessary to move from one area of the game to the other, Senua confronts a different aspect of her past trauma. In these scenes, the focus is entirely on her emotional struggle and ultimate acceptance. At one instance, when Senua rejects the 'darkness,' she yells: "I will not listen to you anymore!" and from that point on, Zynbel's voice is absent. The game systematically has Senua face and overcome aspects of her fears: a god of 'illusions,' a angry fire giant, a village infested by plague, a building where something invisible is chasing her, a building in which she can't see, seeing Dillion's corpse, and walking through a 'sea of corpses' while fighting demons and being mocked by Zynbel's voice. All of the demons she encounters are metaphoric, and only come to her when she is undergoing an emotional battle. But still, she does overcome these obstacles. And in the final scene, she overcomes the parts of herself that were preventing her from accepting who she is. This rejects the trope of having feminine power being explained away by something supernatural, as Senua had to get to the point of emotional acceptance internally and on her own. And by rejecting her father, she separates herself from the male threat that he forced on her.

But most interestingly, this game allows players to viscerally 'live' the experience of a doubly-marginalized character. Ian Bogost states: "almost always, to play a video game is to take

on a role. Games often put you in control, but more than that, they give you an alter-ego. You become the character."[184] *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017) takes the notion of the player 'becoming' someone and takes it to a full conclusion. The player is haunted much like Senua is: the furies are whispering to both the player and Senua throughout the game, sometimes helping, sometimes making the player doubt the actions they are undertaking (for instance, when crossing narrow bridges/platforms, once voice will repeat: "she's going to fall!"). Even the death mechanic merges Senua's experience with the player's. If Senua falls in combat, she will reset at a save point until the black mark on her arm reaches her head, at which point she dies, and the game starts over with no record of player advancement. This mechanic makes the danger to Senua real to the player and can instill the anxiety that Senua feels in combat in the player as well. But at the same time, via cutscenes, the narrative separates the player from Senua by reminding them that the story is *Senua's* and that players are following along. It gives players the ability to witness and feel some of the same things that people living with psychosis do, but without taking away Senua's agency. While it is true that "the player is the prime mover, without the player, the game grinds to a halt,"[185] players are made aware that their choices do not affect the narrative (indeed, there is no choice mechanic). Players' experiences then involve following the narrative of Senua, without having player agency aside from which side objectives to pursue (if any) and controlling Senua in combat/solving the game's puzzles. Thus, most of the agency in the game is given to Senua's character. And most importantly, her story arc shows the complete evolution of her internal struggles, while realistically portraying difficult subject matter.

As a character, Senua is not defined by her illness or her gender. She is a capable warrior, who players witness falling and rising in an effort to continue fighting—fully formed and

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[184] Bogost, 154.
[185] Bogost, 117.

ultimately not defined in relation to male characters, but despite them. And importantly, she is the only character who is ever seen in detail. Dillion's face is not shown, her father's is seen only in a blurred hallucination, and her mother's in seen in blurred hallucination imposed of cliff-faces in certain areas of the game. The focus, then, is entirely on Senua; she is the dominant feature of her narrative). By presenting this narrative, the game implies that it is possible to tell an emotionally visceral and representative narrative of a marginalized individual. The game rejects stereotypes and rejects the notion that female characters must adhere to patriarchal expectations.

d) *Horizon: Zero Dawn* **(2017)**

Horizon: Zero Dawn (2017), unlike *Senua's Sacrifice* is a AAA studio game that gives players a choice-based RPG with a default un-sexualized female protagonist. It is possibly the only example of a large-studio created RPG with a non-optional female lead and does not break from her perspective at any point in the game. This in itself breaks gendered expectations.

The game takes place in the 31st century in a post-apocalyptic land where robotic creatures roam the wilds, dominating the landscape. Humans have mostly lost access to technology and formed themselves into pre-industrial tribal societies, based around geographic locations and general 'traits.' They are the Nora (matriarchal hunter-gatherers), Oseram (metalworkers and craftsmen), Carja (an economic and militaristic monarchy), Banuk (nomadic society), Tenakth (little is known about them by the other tribes, other than that they are raiders), and Utaru (farmers). The plot revolves around Aloy as she tries to make a name for herself with her tribe as a 'motherless outcast.' It follows her as she becomes a recognized warrior, and following an attack on her village by cultists, she embarks on a quest to find them, discover the truth of her own mysterious background, and discover the source of what is known as 'the

derangement'—a phenomenon that has caused the machine creatures to become increasingly aggressive and both invade human villages and attack humans on sight.

The game was developed by Guerilla Games and released under Sony Interactive for the PlayStation 4. It has won several awards, including one for "Outstanding Achievement in Videogame Writing" by the Writer's Guild of American. Reviews for the game are mostly positive, with Metacritic.com giving it an overall score of 90 and user score lies at 8.3. Negative reviews take issue with technical mechanics of combat, and the fact that the game is 'open-world' and has no set world map. Positive critical reviews, however, applaud the game for its handling of a female RPG protagonist and view the game as "fantastically progressive"[186] for female representation.

Of note regarding the development of the game is the fact that having a female protagonist was considered a marketing risk.[187] Sony's president Shuhei Yoshida "revealed in an early interview that they had felt the need to put the game through rigorous market testing. 'She's a female lead character,' he explained, 'That has always been the vision by the team, but we had a discussion: is it too risky to do a female character?'"[188] The fact that the developers seriously questioned the monetary success of a female character points to the larger issue with the gaming market. While many independent (indie) games feature a default female protagonist and offer no choice to play as a male, most large-studio RPGs feature a default male character. Some, like *The Witcher 3* (2015), allow players to briefly play as a female side character, but not in anywhere near as much detail as the male protagonist. Indeed, a positive correlation between

[186] Brusuelas, Candice, "Why Horizon: Zero Dawn is a breakthrough in feminist gaming" (Medium.com, 2018).
[187] Kato, Matthew, "The Origins & World of Horizon: Zero Dawn" (Gameinformer.com, 2015).
[188] Williams, Hayley, "Horizon: Zero Dawn Moves Beyond the 'Strong Female Character'" (Kotaku.com.au, 2017).

the sexualization of female characters and the sales of game studies in the result of Christopher

Near's 2012 study: "results suggest that, among T- and M-rated games, sales are highest with

box art depicting non-central sexualized female characters. The presence of male characters was

positively associated with sales and sexualization of female characters is associated with higher

sales only when there are no female characters on box art."[189] In *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017),

Aloy goes against the norm established by the gaming industry, and as such, was put through

more initial judgment by its own development team over Aloy's gender. Even so, the game's

director Mathijs de Jonge described why the team continued with a female protagonist: "We also

felt like we needed a fresh main character. We've been making *Killzone* games; we've done male

characters for quite a while. Now, we wanted to do something else." He also expressed how the

team approached creating Aloy: "What we have been focusing on is not if it's male or female,

but it's more to figure out her personality. Make her personality really interesting. She's very

curious and determined, and she wants to explore the world and figure out these mysteries. And

hopefully we can give the player the same feeling."[190] Ultimately, the team's focus in making the

game went beyond Aloy's gender, and instead focused on her character.

Unfortunately, however, while the game makes strides in representing female characters,

it does suffer from a problematic treatment of indigenous cultures.[191] For instance, as Dia Lacina

says in her critical review: "*Horizon: Zero Dawn* has been described as taking place in a world

'where life has seemingly reverted to the tribal-like ways of the past' a phrase that erases how

many indigenous peoples still associate as tribal communities and governments, and despite

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[189] Near, 260.

[190] Shaikh, Sehran, "Guerilla Games Explains Why Horizon: Zero Dawn has Female Protagonist Instead of Male Lead" (Gamepur.com, 2016).

[191] Lacina, Dia, "What We Talk About When We Don't Talk About Natives" (Medium.com, 2017); Jasper, Marykate, "Words Matter: *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, Games Criticism, and Native Appropriation" (TheMarySue.com, 2017).

colonialist demands for assimilation, actively live their cultures in much the way they always

have." She further points out the game repeatedly uses four terms that have been historically

leveled at Native Americans: braves, savages, tribal, and primitive. Indeed, in the game, the Nora

tribe (Aloy's) is depicted in clothing that heavily takes from traditional Native American dress

and the other tribes in the game openly refer to the Nora as 'savages.' This is then further

complicated by the fact that Aloy is white, and as one review states, "what's most problematic is

that there are no indigenous people in the game"[192] even though there are many other people of

color featured. Jasper references an interview where a development lead explained their choices:

"in terms of appropriation, Gonzales claimed that Horizon Zero Dawn draws from many sources.

'We weren't looking for inspiration from one particular group, and we cast the net widely to look

at cultures, tribal cultures, around the world, and also throughout history,' he said. 'That's why a

lot of the people talk about the Nora as being like Vikings, or why there are visual elements

reminiscent of Celtic pictographs. So, inspiration came from a lot of different places.'"[193] The

problem here is that developers combined cultural features from several different societies into

one, which in many ways erases them. Furthermore, it is one thing to borrow from extinct white

cultures, like the Celts; it is another to borrow from non-white cultures that still exist, while

having the narrative refer to them as 'primitive' and as 'savages.' In many ways, Aloy's

character plays into a fulfillment of some sort of white tribal fantasy.

    i)   *Horizon: Zero Dawn* **(2017): Visual Representation**

Notably, Aloy is not sexualized or objectified at any point in the game, including by the

camera. The camera does not focus on her body in an objectifying way; instead, it spends most

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[192] Ramanan, Chella, "Horizon Zero Dawn: A Beautiful Game Marred by Cultural
Appropriation" (GameIndustry.com, 2017).
[193] Jasper, Marykate, (2017).

of the time in cutscenes focusing on her face and her emotional reactions. Her proportions are realistic, and the armor coverage is appropriate for her tasks. The majority of her armor sets feature her entire body being covered (i.e. protected), as shown in figure 4.8, which illustrates several of the available armor options for the player.

Figure 4.8. Aloy's Armor Sets. *Horizon: Zero Dawn Wiki*. 2017. Digital Image. Sourced from: https://horizonzerodawn.fandom.com/wiki/Horizon_Zero_Dawn_Wiki

However, it is within the available clothing options where issues of cultural appropriation are most evident. For instance, figure 4.8 shows Aloy in headdresses akin to those found in Native American cultures.

But in terms of sexualization, there is one armor set (Carja armor) which has an option that exposes both Aloy's stomach and chest. However, the Carja are a tribe of humans who live in the desert region of the map and the armor set offers the same type of coverage to male characters seen throughout the game. One such example is the character Nil, who is pictured in figure 4.9 side-by-side with Aloy wearing the Carja armor set. Of note is the fact that both of their chests are covered in similar fashions.

Figure 4.9. Aloy and Nil Armor Comparison. Horizon: Zero Dawn Wiki. 2017. Digital Image. Sourced from: https://horizonzerodawn.fandom.com/wiki/Horizon_Zero_Dawn_Wiki

Overall, the focus of the clothing found throughout the game is not on sexual features, and shows functions needed for the environments of particular areas and fighting styles. However, they do carry problematic connotations for representation and inclusion of indigenous cultures.

ii)   *Horizon: Zero Dawn* **(2017): Narrative Representation**

Aside from breaking the 'white-male-as-default' historical standard, the game also breaks many established gendered tropes, particularly concerning female side characters. But the game also breaks tropes concerning male characters as symbols of hypermasculine power via the character Rost. Rost, like Aloy, is a motherless outcast of the Nora tribe, a matriarchal hunter-gatherer society. He was assigned to care for Aloy by one of the tribe's matriarchs from the time Aloy was an infant. Rost is significant to Aloy's story-line; he functions as a support character but, again, does not adhere to hypermasculine tropes or attempt to take away Aloy's agency. In fact, the opposite is true. One of the first scenes in the game features Rost teaching a young Aloy how to hunt the machine creatures and use a bow and spear. He then charges her to go hunt

without him and bring him back evidence of her kill. From that point onward, he and Aloy partner together in their hunts and Rost, though protective, does not prevent or stop Aloy from fighting, unless the fight would be ill-advised or avoidable. In fact, Rost urges Aloy to not rely on him: "This…attachment to me will only hold you back. It's my wish that you embrace the tribe." His character repeatedly insists that Aloy stand on her own, by teaching her how to survive without him and reassuring her of her strength.

The game goes further in that it gender-flips the trope of having a female character's death serve a male story-line. In Sarkeesian's taxonomy, there is the tendency for games to depend on the 'woman in the refrigerator' plot; a plot that uses violence against, or the death of, a woman in a way that serves only the story-line of the male character. In the cutscene following Aloy becoming a warrior of the Nora, the village is attacked by cultists and Rost sacrifices his life to save Aloy's. And even further, as he pushes Aloy out of danger, he looks at her and says, "survive" before dying. Rost's death serves as the impetus for Aloy to leave the village, as now, she is completely alone there.

The female side characters also do not adhere to the tropes Sarkeesian points to, with many in positions of power, especially within the Nora village. The Nora are ruled by a council of three women (the matriarchs), who are the mouth-piece to the tribe's goddess, the All-Mother (revealed to be an artificial intelligence). These three women dictate how the village interacts with the outside world. Further, the game does not make a distinction between male and female warriors, both in and out of Aloy's tribe. Players encounter both female and male 'enemies' in main plots, side quests, and while exploring the setting. All of them are treated equally and are equally challenging for the player to defeat. This is not something typically seen in games (*Dragon Age* does this as well). As Sarkeesian and Jansz discussed, female side characters have

been historically sexualized and made to inhabit weaker narrative and representative positions. The femininity of these characters in *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017) is not magnified, and they are not turned into sex objects or sinister seductresses that must be subdued. In fact, "all of the women in the game are distinct and different. Horizon's women all have distinct personalities and traits beyond just 'being a woman.' Even the most minor female characters encountered have their own motivations and ambition."[194] In other words, every female character in *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017) has her own agency.

In one instance, before the test that Aloy needs to pass to become a warrior of the tribe, she speaks with an Oseram warrior named Erend. He states that his sister Ersa was taken by a mad Carja king's army to be sacrificed in a blood sacrifice ritual (I note that this plot is especially problematic in terms of indigenous studies). But instead of having Erend embark on a revenge quest, and thus making his sister's trauma impactful for only his narrative, with further questioning Erend reveals Ersa survived her attack and capture, and ultimately lead the army that overthrew the mad king. There is also a game quest that takes place when Aloy encounters a Carja hunter Talanah, that features women rebelling against established patriarchal order. Up until this point, through dialogue with various side characters, it is revealed that the Carja (mostly the Carja men) adhere to old patriarchal traditions, one of which is a male-led hunter's lodge that does not typically allow women warriors to join it. Talanah, then, is a character that explains to Aloy she wishes to lead to the Hunter's Lodge allowing women to admit all people. And there are other women in the Carja village that look to push against the established traditions. Aloy's role itself evolves at this point to something more than her being the heroine. As she encounters the women of the village, they express awe when hearing what Aloy has

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[194] Brusuelas, (2018).

accomplished. But more than that, they begin to look to Aloy as a source of inspiration, she "becomes a catalyst for change."[195] The game features a commonality across its female characters; they are looking to each other as examples of strength.

Aloy as a protagonist is highly engaging. Not only does she serve as a source of inspiration for those around her, but she also consistently shows strength and curiosity throughout the entire game. When the game first opens with the sequence of her childhood, she is shown to constantly go off exploring on her own. In one moment, she ends up falling into an old bunker from before society fell in the apocalypse. Rost goes looking for her, but Aloy must find a way out on her own, without even his voice guiding her through the bunker. She escapes by using the available technology she finds while exploring the bunker. The sequence serves to highlight Aloy's intelligence and self-reliance and presents it early-on to the player. This theme continues and is advanced by the narrative detail that Aloy is an outcast in her tribe because she does not have a mother. As a matriarchal society, those without mothers are considered to be lower-class citizens. Because of this, several tribe members she encounters are openly hostile towards her, especially the boy Bast, a fellow candidate for warrior status. In one scene, he throws a rock at Aloy that strikes her in the head, simply because she is an outcast. The player then can either choose for Aloy to throw the rock and hit him back, call him an idiot, or ignore it and roll her eyes. Each option illustrates her personality and does not have her inhabit a submissive narrative position.

One particularly telling line from Aloy comes when she is talking to Tallanah about namesakes and she says: "My whole life I lived as an outcast from the Nora. They would have been the first to say I wasn't one of them. Yet, as soon as I leave the sacred lands, everyone calls

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[195] Williams, Hayley. (2017).

me 'Aloy of the Nora.' It should be 'Aloy, despite the Nora.'" Here Aloy is completely sure of herself and recognizes that she has gotten to where she is on her own, and thus, does not 'belong' to anyone, even her tribe. There are several other instances in which Aloy recognizes her own strength, sometimes with sarcasm, such as one instance in which she saves male guards from cultists and they thank the sun for saving them, to which, Aloy says: "It wasn't the sun risking its ass down there." But importantly, though often Aloy's defining characteristics are her strength and intelligence, the game includes sequences of Aloy's weaknesses. If it did not do so, Aloy would not be a three-dimensional and fully realized female character. Rost's death was one instance; Aloy begins to doubt her abilities to stand on her own, now that she doesn't have Rost. Another slightly minor but significant feature of nuanced female representation is during dangerous battle scenes, the player can hear Aloy's breathing quicken, and she shows signs of panic, such as reminding herself: "quiet" or "be careful." She is not infallible; however, she is not weak.

Aloy's story depends on representing a female narrative; one of her key motivators is to discover who her mother was, and why she was given up as a baby. But the narrative also turns into a rejection of a male-dominated society. Aloy and the player discover that a man who calls himself Hades was responsible for building the robots that destroyed the Earth. He is the main antagonist of the game, as he is trying to once again destroy the world. He was initially unsuccessful due to Aloy's mother, a scientist named Elisabet Sobeck, who created an A.I. she called GAIA that could stop Hades's virus that caused the machines to attack humans. Effectively, GAIA prevents the world from being destroyed completely, and it is revealed that Gaia created Aloy from DNA taken from Elisabet Sobeck. Aloy was designed by the female-presenting and female-designed A.I. to be the warrior who could stop the spread of Hades's

corrupting virus. In this, symbolically, Aloy has been created from women defying a destructive

male force. The male force at work in the narrative is one of death and destruction (Hades shares

his namesake with the Greek god of death), and the women are responsible for fighting it and

ultimately destroying it completely. Aloy's 'parents' are both female, and she has a truly

matrilineal birth. Further, GAIA created her to be strong, to be independent and capable. This

point is driven home in the final cutscene in which Aloy discovers Elisabet Sobeck's body. There

is an audio recording next to it, with this exchange between GAIA and Sobeck:

> **Elisabet Sobeck:** She said I had to care. She said, "Elisabet, being smart will
>
> count for nothing if you don't make the world better. You have to use your smarts
>
> to count for something, to serve life, not death."
>
> **GAIA:** You often tell stories of your mother. But you are childless.
>
> **Elisabet Sobeck:** I never had time. I guess it was for the best.
>
> **GAIA:** If you had had a child, Elisabet, what would you have wished for him or
>
> her?
>
> **Elisabet Sobeck:** I guess... I would have wanted her to be... curious. And willful -
>
> unstoppable, even... but with enough compassion to... heal the world... just a little
>
> bit.

The traits listed are those that Aloy has throughout the game. She is a nuanced female character

who acts on her own, and in her own power.

Finally, in Aloy's narrative, there is no romance mechanic. Even in male-led RPGs, there

is typically a romance element, but *Horizon* removes it completely. Again, this has the effect of

keeping Aloy's character and narrative in relation to herself the entire focus of the game's plot.

Aloy's character is fully realized, and the same can be said for all the other female characters in

the game. None of them are objectified in any way, and all are shown as capable. Every female character in the game has agency, and in doing so, it subverts the very history of games itself. But the fact that the game eroticizes and appropriates indigenous cultures and their features cannot be divorced from narrative analyses. Though the game presents examples of female characters with agency, it does not represent indigenous cultures in a fair and nuanced way, and instead presents several tone-deaf examples of appropriation. *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017) is an indication of the problems with diversity in games. On the one hand, it portrays female characters well, but on the other, it is culturally and racially tone-deaf. It indicates a deeper problem with racial diversity within the games industry. Indeed, while games are beginning to feature female leads, very few feature lead characters of color (male or female). *Dragon Age* (2009-2014) is one of the few examples of a game series that does so. And while *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017) has diverse character casting, most of the lead characters are white, and it does appropriate indigenous cultures, especially within clothing designs.

V)   **Conclusion**

      Games that feature violence against female characters, and/or otherwise objectify female

characters have far-reaching social effects beyond Gamergate. Gamergate itself is an example of

the impact such problematic portrayals can have on a larger social scale. In other words,

Gamergate is a symptom that is indicative larger and far-reaching patriarchal attitudes that

perpetuate hypermasculinity and white-masculinity as the ideal. Video games have historically

been perpetuating this norm, most troublingly with the implication that companies are doing so

because 'sex sells.'[196] Games and media have the potential to affect how an individual

experiencing them sees their internal and external world, and how to interact with it. Several of

the studies referenced in this thesis have found that exposure to gender stereotyping and violence

against women in games affects how both male and female players make social judgments, both

of themselves and others. For instance, Karen Dill, et al. noted: "A significant interaction

indicated that men exposed to stereotypical content made judgements that were more tolerant of

a real-life instance of sexual harassment compared to controls. Long-term exposure to video

game violence was correlated with greater tolerance of sexual harassment and greater rape myth

acceptance."[197] It is not within the scope of this study to claim that exposure to gendered video

game violence will absolutely cause negative effects in all individuals, however, exposure to

games that keep within sexist tropes for both male and female characters can affect how

individuals in the real world construct their socio-cultural frameworks and participate in cultural

rhetoric and discourse. This can occur both on a personal and internal level, and an external and

global one. Notably, studies have found that exposure to gendered stereotypes in gaming leads to

effects on players' self-concepts. As one study states: "Female self-efficacy was negatively

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[196] Near, Christopher, 260.
[197] Dill et al, (2008), 1408.

affected by gameplay with the sexualized female character"[198] and "…gamers may adopt beliefs and standards that are in line with these sexualized portrayals, resulting in the desire to be like the characters (among women) and to judge self and others based upon the characters (among both men and women)."[199]

But it is not only women that are affected by exposure to stereotypical gender portrayals in games and other media. Another study on the effects of sexist video game advertisements in gaming magazines found that men "exposed to advertisements featuring women portrayed as sex objects subsequently show greater rape-supportive attitudes (Lanis and Covell 1995). Dill found a positive correlation between violent video game playing and endorsement of rape myths, including myths that women secretly want to be raped and that sometimes women 'deserve' to be raped."[200] Both Dill's and Behm-Morawitz's studies make references to the potential effects of stereotypical male portrayals on male self-esteem as well: "interestingly, for men, it was not exposure to physically attractive males, but to *dominant* males that damaged their view of their own desirability as a mate."[201] Anita Sarkeesian mentioned that the portrayal of men often spoke to a heteronormative and masculine power fantasy, especially in the instances (like with the 'sinister seductress' trope) where male characters reassert their dominance over a female threat. Such a sentiment was echoed in many of the social psychology studies previously mentioned, and one in particular stated: "for men, the gender portrayal is equally stereotypical and blatant, showing men as symbols of power and dominance."[202] Hypermasculinity is portrayed as glamourous, in media, typically especially within advertisements for games themselves. Men are

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[198] Behm-Morawitz and Mastro, 808.
[199] Ibid., 809.
[200] Dill and Thill, 858.
[201] Ibid., 853.
[202] Dill et al, (2005), 118.

featured much more frequently within advertisements, and in ways that emphasize their

leadership qualities: "men were more likely to be heroes and main characters, use more weapons,

have more abilities, and were more muscular and powerful."[203] More troublingly this trend

perpetuates the gender-role myth that violence is manly.[204] Adding to this point, "children may

also compare themselves to their favorite characters in terms of strength, height and abilities.

Lacking the strength, height, and abilities of the character, they may feel that they are not as

'good' as the character [which] implies that their video game character may serve as a role model

for their ideal behavior and characteristics."[205] This problem becomes compounded by what

another article points out: "video gaming is now often children's first and most compelling

introduction to digital technologies, and is presumed to be a door to a broader range of digital

tools and applications."[206] Studies have suggested that games have the potential to code gender

stereotypes in children, thus perpetuating the cycle.

And while those particular studies reference concerns around children's self-concept,

several others have emphasized the same type of impact games and media can have as adults,

such as the perpetuating of gender-role myths. In other words, people that play games may

emulate the perceived 'ideal' characteristics—which in male game characters, is often

entrenched in violence and being positioned to be dominant over female characters. Interestingly

Karen Dill's study posited that if the hypermasculine portrayals of male characters cause male

players' self-esteem to drop or otherwise be reduced, seeing the virtual 'success' afforded to the

idealized male video game characters, may cause them to emulate their problematic behaviors in

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[203] Miller, 735.
[204] Dill, (2007), 861.
[205] Ibid, 735-36.
[206] Hayes, Elisabeth, "Women, Video Gaming, and Learning: Beyond Stereotypes" *TechTrends* 49, no. 5(2005), p. 23-8.

an attempt to fulfill the presented hypermasculine ideal (as these male characters are portrayed as confident), as well as internalize problematic attitudes towards women (such as acceptance of violence).

However, though the current prevalent trends in video games are negative, the games referenced in this study cautiously indicate a change within the atmosphere of the industry, when taken in conjunction with data in recent studies on female representation. Furthermore, games' influence on social attitudes is apparent, and could potentially be utilized for positive representation (and thus positive social effects). Indeed, "this [research] suggests that powerful female video game characters may have a positive influence on male players in that (regardless of sexualization) they are much stronger and more powerful representations of women than is typical of many other popular media products. Exposure to such powerful images may decrease the tendency to gender-stereotype based on appearance."[207] There is a significant amount of evidence that indicates media representations have a real-world effect on cultivating social codes and systems, and the implications of this fact go both ways. While games generally have had negative impacts because of negative portrayals, there is the potential for games to over-come these tropes and begin to show positive representations, which then lead to positive effects. In recent years, the game industry seems to have become at least partially aware of the social climate surrounding games (likely sparked by Gamergate responses) and have taken steps to both include women in the development side, and increase fair representation within games.[208] Specifically, there are several organizations and non-profits that have been started in recent years that cater programs specifically towards women and girls (for game development and play), such

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[207]Behm-Morawitz and Mastro, 820.

[208] Wallace, Kimberly, "Women Creating a Brighter Future for Games" (GameInformer.com, 2018).

as Pixelles, Girls Make Games, and iThrive Games. The goal of these organizations is to get women and girls involved in the gaming industry, by cultivating and providing a community of support. If combined with the cultivation of fair representation and awareness of the need for such representation, games have the potential for positive effects. Indeed, the survey (referenced in the introduction) conducted by the gaming company EA "found that 56 percent of 2,252 survey participants (from ages 13-54) consider it important for companies to make their games more inclusive" and that "45 percent said that they would be 'likelier to play' a game that included these features."[209]

In the end, simply having games focus their narratives on one fairly represented female character alone is not the sort of inclusion that the industry should advocate for. Further, it is limiting to simply focus on what 'good' representation looks like for marginalized groups, as Adrienne Shaw argues, "races, genders, and sexualities are not fixable, knowable, static entities that can be described."[210] Game developers should further move beyond concerns over a character's gender or race and focus instead on what makes that character an agent in their narrative. As Holly Green puts it, "don't write them with strength as the goal: write them with agency."[211] Shaw advocates for developers to use diversity as a design checkpoint, "what logic underlies the structure of options made, and what would happen if those logics were simply forgotten?"[212]

This study focuses on the strong examples of representation of women; however, it is important to also consider that gender diversity is not the only issue with diverse representation

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[209] Brown, Fraser. (2019)
[210] Shaw, Adrienne, Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 231
[211] Green, Holly, "Horizon Zero Dawn, Joss Whedon, and the Problem with 'Strong Female Characters'" (PasteMagazine.com, 2017).
[212] Shaw, Adrienne, 231-232.

in games, as the majority of games remain white, heterosexual spaces. Only one AAA game in the past decade featured a non-optional African American male lead, *Mafia III* (2016). And in terms of LGBTQIA+ representation, most of what is found in AAA titles in via secondary and optional characters, such as in RPGs like *Dragon Age* (2009-2014). This is not to say that these games do not represent these characters with immersive and detailed narratives. Indeed, in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) one of the main companions (Dorian) is a gay man whose father literally tried to 'change' him, and players interact with Dorian as he confronts his father and are witness to Dorian's emotional reality. However, the point is that representation of people of color and the LGBTQIA+ community is rarely seen within game narratives. This study did not closely analyze the impact of game narratives on LGBTQIA+ culture, or on representation of people of color, but it is just as important an issue as female representation, especially if games are to be utilized as objects for social change.

Just as games hold the potential for combatting problematic sexist attitudes, they have the potential to combat problematic homophobic and racist attitudes as well. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman argue, "'the cultural dimensions of games are exceedingly complex; your game should recognize this complexity and do it justice within its design.' This requires substantially more diversity in games and in all media, so that single characters do not bear the onus of standing for every person that might share characteristics with them. It is not about a single character in a single game but about all characters in all games in media."[213] Indeed, conversations should include all male and female characters within games, and how they are being represented as agents of their narratives. The treatment of marginalized groups in games contributes to and perpetuates social discourse and given the potential for games to cultivate

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[213] Ibid., 231.

social perceptions, it is imperative to understand what narratives games portray and how they operate within social discourse.

The "game experience allows a person to 'transform' into someone else for the experience. The experience offers a multitude of variations on a theme that players can exhaustively explore to gain an understanding."[214] Stories are distanced from the real-world, but as seen in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017) they can allow the player to empathize with a marginalized character, by cultivating empathy with that character. The player can acquire a deeper knowledge of lived real-world experiences. As Salen and Zimmerman explain:

> Games can represent by creating depictions of characters, stories, settings, ideas, and behaviors. Game representations gain meaning with the game universe, as they are experience through play. In this sense, play can be transformative. By highlighting rigid [cultural] structures it puts 'at play,' a game can shed light on the operations of culture as a whole. Creating games is also creating culture, and therefore beliefs, ideologies, and values present within culture will always be a part of a game, intended or not.[215]

If so structured, games have the potential to converse with and subvert the problematic ideologies of the cultures they exist in. It is then imperative for games to feature diverse characters who are agents of their own narratives. By including fully realized agents, games can contribute to normalizing diversity and rejecting restrictive, white, and heteronormative societal ideals.

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[214] Mateas, 21.
[215] Salen and Zimmerman, 517.

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